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**The Poetics of Sprawl: Literary and Filmic  
Engagements with American Suburbia,  
1990-2017**

**Pippa Eldridge**

Thesis for the degree of PhD in English  
Birkbeck, University of London, 2019

## **Signed Declaration**

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Pippa Eldridge

30<sup>th</sup> January 2019

## Abstract

Analysing fiction and film produced between 1990 and 2017, this thesis traces a loosening of American suburbia's narrow socio-cultural and geographical co-ordinates, and maps the emergence of sprawl as a material landscape and social, psychic and cultural condition.

Uncomfortable truths about enduring 'national' values of individualism and frontier heroism permeate my work. However, its justification lies not in exposing geopolitical or historical flaws, but in demonstrating that the erosion of hegemonic narratives linked to suburbia has galvanised a multifarious reconceptualisation of suburban space. This project unpacks sprawl's connotations as a loosely-definable material condition that conjures homogenisation and diversification, growth and implosion, rupture and continuity, and considers the implications of, and possibilities created by, its reconfiguration. It challenges dystopian projections of suburbia – advanced by post-war social studies and erroneously mapped onto fiction by leading cultural critics – and illuminates fictional landscapes of dense socio-political networks. Articulating a poetics of sprawl foregrounds suburbia as a culturally-significant site, whilst opening its literature and film to more complex geographies and critical frameworks.

Chapter one plots suburbia's material and socio-political evolution from 1945-present. It analyses the conjunctures that created debilitating associations of suburbia with stasis, and justifies revisionist readings of twentieth-century suburban fictions. Chapter two interrogates crises of suburban place identification in the 1990s, and argues that parodic texts by Wells Tower and A.M. Homes problematise binaristic models of coercion or collapse. Chapter three tackles the ethical corollaries of invoking a poetics of sprawl. It explores Danielle Dutton and Karen Tei Yamashita's renegotiation of local and global interdependencies, and scrutinises their attempts to embrace flexible, less neoliberal, models of identity and community. Chapter four examines film and the urban 'core' around which suburbia is physically and imaginatively structured. It maintains that twenty-first-century horror – long thought to validate white anti-urbanism – increasingly confronts the causes of post-metropolitan decline.

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## Introduction

### I. 'None of this is set in concrete'

In 1989 – just four decades after William Levitt founded America's first mass-produced suburb – the Smithsonian Institution of American History launched a bid to secure an entire Levittown house to display in its Washington museum. 'Although none of this is set in concrete,' declared curator Bill Yeingst, injecting a touch of whimsy into the unprecedented proposal, 'the Levittown house would be dismantled at the site, transported to Washington and reconstructed.' There, divested of its inhabitants, it would continue to 'play out the stories of America. Stories important to everyone.'<sup>1</sup> That the archetypal suburb, seemingly epitomised by the cookie-cutter housing of 1950s Levittown, has played a crucial role in the cultural construction of America, is central to my enquiry. Various portrayed as the physical embodiment of the American Dream, a totalitarian machine producing conformity, a Thoreauvian retreat and a consumer hub, suburbia has been idealised by early TV sitcoms and derided as 'a cancerous fungus' in certain 'accounts of modernity.'<sup>2</sup> A geographically liminal and historically 'unburdened' entity – both physically and philosophically located between the urban and the rural – it has functioned as a fitting vehicle for many of the anxieties and ideals of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Most often, though, suburbia has been imagined as the modern incarnation of a distinctly American phenomenon: the frontier, the mythical place where social development touches primitivism, where individuals marry social mobility with heroic self-reliance, and to which they 'escape from the old identity, the old debts.'<sup>3</sup> And, in failing to fulfil these foundational dreams, it has just as frequently shouldered the blame for the failure of the American project as a whole.

By endeavouring to encapsulate suburban history in a static icon, the Smithsonian proposal reveals a more problematic paradigm at the heart of cultural conceptualisations of suburban America; a propensity to understand suburbia less as a varied and evolving material terrain than as a storehouse for collective mythology. Just a year later, statistics revealed that America had become the first nation with

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Yeingst, interview with Ketcham, Diane, 'Long Island Journal,' *New York Times*, 5 November 1989 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/05/nyregion/long-island-journal-792689.html>> [Accessed 5 August 2011].

<sup>2</sup> Roger Silverstone (ed.), *Visions of Suburbia* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (London: Virago, 1986), p.143.



more suburbanites than city and rural dwellers combined.<sup>4</sup> As the century drew to a close, the iconic, middle-class tract developments that loomed large in the cultural imagination had been modified and all-but subsumed by a vast amalgam of broadly residential environments, comprising a range of communities, and frequently divided into sub-categories depending upon the bias of the observer. At a time when suburbia has become synonymous with sprawling ubiquity, the desire to anchor it – territorially, temporally and imaginatively – arguably represents a futile battle for clarity in a landscape without frontiers.

Edward W. Soja differentiates mid- from late-twentieth-century suburbia by referring to the latter as a ‘postmetropolis,’ a complex new spatiality in which what is urban has become indistinguishable from what is non-urban, where the boundaries between interior and exterior have become fluid, and concepts such as city, suburb and country have been rendered obsolete.<sup>5</sup> Once lauded as the materialisation of socio-economic progress, suburbia has become increasingly difficult to abstract. Sizeable fissures have opened between the cultural idea and the object it describes.

What follows is an examination of this amorphous spatiality and its relationship with the American novel and motion picture.<sup>6</sup> This project maps the emergence of ‘sprawl’ as both a material landscape and a social, psychic and cultural condition, and analyses recent fiction and film that uses sprawl’s contradictory spaces to tussle with and renegotiate opposing views of history. The ensuing chapters tease out sprawl’s complex connotations as a loosely definable material condition that simultaneously conjures homogenisation and diversification, growth and implosion, rupture and continuity, seepage and commingling. Chapter one outlines the history and periodisation of the term, and more thoroughly describes its various and competing uses, but it is worth stating here that sprawl is broadly understood as a low-density, automobile-orientated, multinucleated phenomenon, characterised by

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century Fiction and Film* (New York: Macmillan, 2004), p.2. The 2010 U.S. Census Bureau defines suburbanites as those living in metropolitan statistical areas outside the central city.

<sup>5</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Following Soja, I use the word spatiality to signal the emergence of a more nuanced understanding of space as the mutable product of a multiplicity of social relations and power dynamics across all spatial scales, from local to global. Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), p.79.

leapfrogging over vacant land. It entered the realm of statistical analysis in the early 1970s in response to the growth and diversification of the U.S. suburbs and seismic shifts in America's economic infrastructure. Stretching through old urban cores and once-remote outposts, and confounding easy distinctions between city, suburb and country, sprawl erodes the 'familiar geographical landmarks of empire' and problematises corresponding ideas about nationhood, creating a space that is extraordinarily resistant to visual or textual encapsulation.<sup>7</sup>

Uncomfortable truths about America's enduring, destructive emphasis on inherited, 'national' values of individualism, expansionism and frontier heroism – without recourse to actual human experience and historical precedent – will permeate the work that follows. Indeed, this project traces a burgeoning culture of private interest that has propelled sprawl's proliferation and underlines the growing economic and racial stratification linked to its manifestations. Nevertheless, its justification lies not in the exposure of geopolitical or historical flaws, but in the suggestion that the erosion of these hegemonic narratives, so carefully tethered to suburban development, has paved the way for a more considered and multifarious reconceptualisation of space.<sup>8</sup>

I will demonstrate that sprawl has consistently and erroneously been imagined as a negation, an absence, and a depthless, undifferentiated, postmodern void.<sup>9</sup> In both right- and left-wing political theory, it has signalled the end of history, alternately ushering in a realm of universal economic freedom and heralding the devastating

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<sup>7</sup> Petra Mitchell, *Cartographic Strategies of Postmodernity: The Figure of the Map in Contemporary Theory and Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.1.

<sup>8</sup> In this respect, this project affiliates itself with cultural geography, spearheaded by Edward Soja during the 1980s, influenced by the poststructuralism of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, and allied with the human geography of David Harvey. With Soja, it refutes the notion that 'space and the making of human geographies' are 'mere physical background [...] for the human social drama,' and attends to the relationship between individual and built environment, physical space and social process, culture and geography. Soja, 'Spatial Justice and the Right to the City: An Interview with Edward Soja,' conducted by Frederic Dufaux, *Justice Spatiale*, No. 3 (March 2011), pp.1-17, p.4.

<sup>9</sup> In the introduction to *Where We Live Now: An Annotated Reader*, ed. by Matthew Stadler (Portland: Verse Chorus Press, 2008), Matthew Stadler encapsulates this view, describing sprawl thus: 'This unspecific threat – this failure to find language – is the sharpest evidence we have of our helplessness. Sprawl has no autonomous history or ontology; it is a negation, the absence of something else, the failure to build city or countryside. Sprawl is the disappearance of an idea.' Stadler, p.16.

ubiquity of neoliberalism.<sup>10</sup> In social studies, it has been equated with a burgeoning culture of nihilism, and in urban theory it has frequently been approached with unequivocal disdain, deemed responsible for the loss of an ill-defined communalism.<sup>11</sup> According to certain literary critics, meanwhile, sprawl has generated the curdling of the suburban novel, leaving it increasingly small-minded, self-referential and involute.<sup>12</sup> Unlike several of the theorists with whom I will engage, I strenuously avoid universalising claims of consumer homogenisation, political indifference and cognitive crisis, arguing that such conceptualisations risk exchanging one prescriptive view of space for another.

This thesis contends that sprawl is not to be equated with the loss of language and ideas but with the proliferation of more open, critically-nuanced narratives in fiction and film. In *Sprawling Places* (2008), David Kolb surmises that ‘it is liberating to have more than hierarchical and concentrically related places and topologies of connection,’ but also stresses that ‘there is no need to shun or flee hierarchical and concentric places’ altogether, ‘as long as those are open to a wider network of possibilities.’<sup>13</sup> This project thus demands a new way of looking at both sprawl and its imaginaries – one that does not insist on defining according to old examples. Sprawl is mutable, and American regions and people are interconnected in increasingly complex spatial, socio-cultural, economic and political ways. By examining the myriad identities that these spaces harbour, the fictions and films I discuss ‘give society more room to deal with its injustices and give imagination more openings to [...] improve planning and architectural forms.’<sup>14</sup>

As it considers the implications of – and new possibilities created by – these processes of spatial reconfiguration, this thesis addresses the following questions: Why and how is suburbia fundamentally connected to the historical and ongoing

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<sup>10</sup> For an example of the former, see Brink Lindsey, *The Age of Abundance: How Prosperity Transformed America's Politics and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). For the latter, see Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society,’ *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983). Both texts are discussed in chapter two.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Violence of the Global,’ trans. by François Debrix, *Ctheory*, 20 May 2003 <<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385>> [Accessed 2 September 2014].

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Anis Shivani ‘The Shrinking of American Fiction,’ *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Autumn, 2004), pp.680-690. Shivani’s work is discussed in detail in chapter one.

<sup>13</sup> David Kolb, *Sprawling Places* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2008), p.11.

<sup>14</sup> Kolb, p.192.

transformation of the American national idea? Why, historically, has it been characterised as either a utopia or dystopia, and who is responsible for perpetuating these binaristic models? To what extent does sprawl mark a break with previous forms? Crucially, what *new* material and discursive borders might be associated with it? According to the literary and filmic representations discussed in the following chapters, what is at stake when individuals inhabit this spatiality, and how is their relationship with place shifting? In what ways have sprawl's imaginaries been shaped by the social, political, cultural and economic contexts in which they have been created, and how do they attempt to mediate understandings of them in turn? What does each text or film do to define or subvert the conceptual parameters of city, suburb and country, and to what end? More importantly, to what extent do they seek to renegotiate the relationship between the regional, national and global, and gesture towards more fluid ways of being and belonging? Can one trace certain poetic, aesthetic and sensual qualities across these portrayals of sprawl? Specifically, what are the affinities between postmodernist or experimental literary writing and suburban sprawl, and how useful is it to posit a correspondence? Finally, what are the ethics of representation, and how do these writers and filmmakers negotiate them?

I am interested in what I perceive to be a loosening of suburbia's narrow socio-cultural and geographical co-ordinates, and I argue that recent literary and filmic representations are actively leveraging these fissures. Where structure and order have thinned out, writers and film-makers have seized upon new opportunities to scrutinise and revise the manifold cultural uses to which suburbia has been put. This project challenges the persistently dystopian projection of the suburbs advanced by post-war social studies and various contemporary urban geographers,<sup>15</sup> as well as by leading literary critics.<sup>16</sup> It contends that these critics have habitually misread

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<sup>15</sup> For exemplary post-war social studies, see David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), and Richard E. Gordon, Katherine E. Gordon, and Max Gunther, *The Split-Level Trap* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1960). One contemporary urban geographer to whom I refer is James Howard Kunstler, whose *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1994) is discussed in chapter one.

<sup>16</sup> Literary critics generally concur with Catherine Jurca's study *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), which argues that twentieth-century novels about suburbia 'borrow from and mimic' (p.136) post-war social studies that posit suburbia as a dystopia.

suburban fiction and film as espousers of a limited vision of social and spatial manipulation advanced by post-war suburban social studies. It maintains, moreover, that these art forms have long-since moved away from this condition and instead read the suburbs as fluid, complex environments, criss-crossed by dense socio-political and ideological networks, and with rich historical resonances. During an age of scepticism and fluidity – as both anxious and insouciant theorists declare the new American centre ‘ideologically up for grabs’ – there has never been a more appropriate time to review these liminal spaces.<sup>17</sup> My contribution to knowledge lies in identifying a fundamentally flexible and non-exhaustive archive of recent fiction and film that foregrounds an uneasy oscillation between internal coherency and contingency, realism and experimentalism, humanist perspectives and postmodern fragmentation, as it seeks to disrupt the logic of progress and grapple with the challenges presented by sprawl and the rhetoric that surrounds it. I argue that, since the early 1990s, writers and filmmakers have become increasingly preoccupied with the process of narration, attending with new urgency to the ethical corollaries of deconstructing the various myths that for decades have sustained a problematically narrow suburban imaginary. As they interrogate the potential pitfalls of challenging order through aesthetics, these works navigate sprawl’s many contradictions and strive for a narrative that is neither restrictive nor completely unmoored.

## **II. Physical, Symbolic, Embodied**

This project is concerned with the complex interactions between suburbia’s shifting physical forms, the imaginaries that have come to inhere within them, and the evolving experiences of the people that inhabit them. As the following chapter will show, post-war suburbanisation played a fundamental role in shaping American culture. Whilst generating an illusion of homogeneity and collective goals, this process was implicitly hierarchical, involving, Amy Maria Kenyon notes, the ‘redistribution of resources, rights, political power and cultural authority along racist and spatially exclusive lines.’<sup>18</sup> Consequently, early suburbanisation helped to code various ‘acceptable’ behaviours and social relations that drove ongoing socio-

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<sup>17</sup> Lindsey, p.10. Though more than a decade old, Brink Lindsey’s rather cavalier comment remains pertinent at a time of intense political division – as reflected in the 2016 U.S. presidential election results – and growing socio-economic and racial stratification.

<sup>18</sup> Amy Maria Kenyon, *Dreaming Suburbia: Detroit and the Production of Post-War Space and Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), p.155.

economic, political and spatial change.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, those excluded were frequently corralled at the opposite pole of the conceptual binary, homogenised in turn as the non-subjects of a sovereign state. In *The Urban Experience* (1989), David Harvey implores his reader to ‘penetrate the fetishisms’ that underpin ‘common sense representations of daily experience,’ arguing that doing so might shed much light on the intersections between culture, geography, politics and economics.<sup>20</sup>

It is my premise that the novels and films I discuss effectively dramatise the habitually neglected third node in this triad: the individual and local particularities that were subsumed beneath monolithic spectacles of social change during the dominant critical construction of American suburbia. In fact, they all do what Bill Yeingst does not: study suburbia not as an abstraction or stage for a performance that is already written, but as a ‘lived experience,’ engaged in an ongoing, mutually defining relationship with its occupants.<sup>21</sup> Drawing upon Henri Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of space as a complex social product, shaped and reproduced by the values and actions of those moving within it, this project refutes the assumption that suburbia is a uniform material environment, responsible for producing a homogenous populace, and challenges its frequent construction as the embodiment of alienating political and economic orders.<sup>22</sup> With Lefebvre, I recognise that the production of space at the hands of architects, businesspeople, political figureheads – and, in this case, cultural commentators that sanctioned suburbia – enabled the survival of post-war capitalism, but I am committed to emphasising the movements of the inhabitants of that space, and to the narratives that express them in political and cultural practice.<sup>23</sup> The works addressed in this project all make room for individual identities and their experiences in spaces dense with history. In doing so,

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<sup>19</sup> David Harvey cites shifting concepts of individualism, class, community, the state and the family as the principle loci of power in post-war America, and stresses the importance of analysing the interrelations between them to fully comprehend processes of capitalist consciousness formation. David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p.231.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey, *The Urban Experience*, p.231. For example, Harvey invites his reader to interrogate the source of assumptions that ‘the housing crisis produces crime, the car produces the suburb’ in order that they might build a fuller picture of socio-political, economic and cultural power dynamics.

<sup>21</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Blackwell, 1991), p.93.

<sup>22</sup> See Lefebvre, pp.7-9 for more detail on the ways in which social relations are mediated by political systems.

<sup>23</sup> Lefebvre, in turn, is influenced by Michel Foucault’s claim that power survives by disciplining space. See ‘Of Other Spaces’ in *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 22-27.

they not only foreground the characters' various struggles to forge subjectivities not beholden to narrowly prescribed binaries, but also confirm that even the most rigidly controlled spaces can never be reproduced exactly, since both social relations and subjectivities are bound to change over time. Thus, to attend to lived experience is to attend, inexorably, to difference and processes of becoming. It is also to challenge reductive ways of perceiving national and global developments, and reposition debates about suburban culture firmly in the context of people's lives.

I am less interested in capturing the lived experience of specific architectural forms associated with sprawl than I am in examining what responses to lived experiences might reveal about social, political or cultural change on a broader level. For example, according to these novels and films, how does it feel to live through a phase of globalisation characterised by rampant deregulation and alleged cultural homogenisation, contrary but attendant defensive localisms, and, more recently, through a deep recession and era of precarity that has led certain theorists to herald a 'global retreat' after decades of economic integration?<sup>24</sup> Often, though not always, these representations begin by invoking an antagonistic relationship between individual and built environment in landscapes of low-density, superhighway-dominated, environmentally hazardous, increasingly privatised, shopping-mall-

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<sup>24</sup> Following David Held et al., I take globalisation to mean the 'transformation in the spatial organisation of social relations and transactions – assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact – generating transcontinental or interregional flows.' I recognise globalisation as being coextensive with local and national spatial-temporal processes of change, with 'social and economic relations and networks which are organised on a local and/or national basis' at one end of the 'continuum' and 'social and economic relations and networks which crystallize on the wider scale of regional and global interactions' at the other. David Held and others, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp.15-16. Neoliberal approaches to globalisation currently dominate the world market. In the 1990s, the creation of the World Trade Organisation and the signing of various multilateral trade agreements, including NAFTA and GATT, reduced tariffs, surmounted barriers to trade and opened up world markets to entrepreneurial capitalism.

I identify and discuss in detail various 'localisms' in chapters one and two. See also James S. Duncan and Nancy G. Duncan, *Landscapes of Privilege: The Politics of the Aesthetic in an American Suburb: Aesthetics and Affluence in an American Suburb* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Judith Butler defines precarity as 'that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection.' Butler, 'Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics,' *AIBR*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (September-December 2009), pp.i-xiii, p.iii. Precarity can manifest in environmental injustice and in the ghettoization or abandonment of impoverished communities and designates a state of being extraordinarily vulnerable.

See Anthony Faiola, 'A Global Retreat as Economies Dry Up,' *Washington Post*, 5 March 2009 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/04/AR2009030404221.html>> [Accessed 31 October 2017].

orientated sprawl, and all express a degree of cynicism about the social benefits of purely architectural and economic restructuring. Whilst I do not wish to suggest that architecture should *not* attempt to ameliorate standards of living, it is a cynicism that I share. In chapter one, I dissect New Urbanism's claim to be able to 'build' a better society, taking issue with its crude evocation of an American national character, and arguing that its practices have frequently perpetuated exclusion and elitism. Still, in the fictions and films under discussion, these antagonistic relationships rarely remain static throughout, since physical structures are portrayed as being merely one aspect of a complex spatiality in which the real and symbolic, personal and social, local and global, collide and commingle. And indeed, just as the characters' identities continue to be shaped by their diverse interactions with their built environment, so too do the places they inhabit continue to evolve within larger networks.

Negotiating a unity between space and time is a fundamental concern in the novels and films under consideration. In other words, none seek to foreground spatiality at the *expense* of temporality. Nor do they herald the 'end' of history and scope for progressive accomplishments altogether, even as they foreground the intensification of geopolitical and environmental crises that problematise narratives of pioneering expansion-over-time. Doreen Massey observes that 'it sometimes seems that in the Gadarene rush to abandon the singularity of the modernist grand narrative, what has been adopted in its place is a vision of an instantaneity of interconnections. But this is to replace a single history with no history – hence the complaint, in this guise, of depthlessness.'<sup>25</sup> It is here that I would like to fundamentally differentiate the experimental work I analyse from the mostly contemporaneous 'Blank Fiction' of Chuck Palahniuk and Bret Easton Ellis, whose novels are preoccupied with the apparently simultaneous dissolution of material, moral and temporal boundaries in an era of intense capitalist restructuring.<sup>26</sup> With their emotionless prose and violent, disjointed plotlines replicating the excesses and jaded materialism of contemporary society, Palahniuk and Ellis reimagine history as mere succession without evolution, 'a time of a multiplicity of discrete things.'<sup>27</sup> In the terrifyingly apolitical, ahistorical

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<sup>25</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2005), p.14.

<sup>26</sup> The term Blank Fiction was coined by James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture, and the Contemporary American Novel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> Massey, p.23.



worlds they depict, everything – from the home to the self – is mediated by mass consumption. Whilst none of the works I discuss signals a return to realism, each reflects an interest in the implications of attempting to forge stable, but not static, connections in a dynamic environment of multiple, interrelated histories. Accordingly, their deconstruction and tactical restructuring of dominant epistemologies should not be considered apolitical, or liable to lead only to nihilism and chaos. Instead, they attend to the relational construction of space; ‘its production through practices of material engagement’ and social interaction.<sup>28</sup>

Any characters in the forthcoming chapters that *do* succumb to cycles of ‘inertial implosion’ do so not because their environment is morphing from one life-curtailling space to another, but because they fail to accept responsibility for their part in ongoing social and spatial change.<sup>29</sup> Instead, they remain attached to what Marc Augé describes as ‘fantasies of a society anchored since time immemorial in the permanence of an intact soil outside which nothing is understandable.’<sup>30</sup> Moreover, when characters wallow in stasis or behave as monadic units drifting in space, their authors situate their changing suburban experience within a wider socio-historical context. Thus, if they evoke characters who suffer from feelings of alienation and anomie, it is not, as critics have assumed, because their work is inward-looking and domestic in scope, but because they are interrogating larger systemic issues and cultural paradigms through the lens of individual experience. Where possible, they employ meta-fictional tactics to negotiate suburbia’s cultural legacy, exposing the slipping points within which their characters might have inscribed a new story.<sup>31</sup>

### III. Accommodating the Ex-Centric

Of course, I do not merely attend to the white middle-class experience of suburbia, and stress throughout that the American suburbs are – and have, to a certain extent,

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<sup>28</sup> Massey, p.53.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas Kellner, ‘Jean Baudrillard After Modernity: Provocations On A Provocateur and Challenger,’ *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 2006), pp.1-37, p.25. This form of inertial implosion can be seen in select characters in the texts referred to in chapters one and two. I do not wish to suggest that the authors of these texts advocate neoliberal self-responsibilization in the absence of state support. They do, however, suggest that their characters have a *degree* of agency to effect change in their environment, and imply that their nihilism is fuelled by an inability to imagine their lives as valuable outside their repressive socio-cultural inheritance.

<sup>30</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (New York: Verso, 2008), p.36.

<sup>31</sup> These metafictional tactics are discussed in detail in the second half of both chapters two and three.

always been – both racially and economically variegated. Nevertheless, with Amy Maria Kenyon, I hold that ‘the success of postwar suburbanization depended on a kind of cultural dreaming, on a mystification of processes of disinvestment *in and through* culture.’<sup>32</sup> Kenyon’s premise – that suburbanisation involved reconfiguring the American dream as a white, suburban phenomenon, and that its imaginative detachment from geographical and historical specificity was frequently accompanied by a series of physical exclusions – drives my enquiry in chapter one. The second half of this project explores portraits of suburbia’s shifting demographics, and examines its continuing processes of marginalisation. Whilst Wells Tower, Danielle Dutton and A.M. Homes depict characters who live relatively privileged lives of financial security and material freedom, Karen Tei Yamashita and film-makers Fede Alvarez and David Robert Mitchell evoke socially and economically disenfranchised individuals who do not. In the latter examples, characters are rarely equipped with the same tools to reshape their environment and alter the status quo. Nevertheless, an undercurrent of brutality – whether remembered or present – haunts every one of the representations I discuss: even Dutton’s sunnier exploration of home-making in a sprawling consumer no-place briefly attends to the savagery historically entrenched in a landscape that has displaced and subsequently demonised various figures in the pursuit of a ‘collective’ goal.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, where the literary critics that I will discuss posit a crisis of suburban representation linked to race and class, identifying an authorial lament about the dissolution of white (male) privilege, I identify something far more conscious and evaluative.

In engaging novels and films that address the various processes of spatial, socio-economic, political and cultural ‘disinvestment’ that helped to construct suburbia as a new centre, I endeavour to demystify these cultural processes *through* a cultural medium that has all-too-frequently been lumped together with the rigid and amnesiac discourses that Kenyon evokes.<sup>34</sup> This project explores literature and film that speaks

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<sup>32</sup> Kenyon, p.2.

<sup>33</sup> Observing that ‘a suburban suspicion and premonition of violence run[s] through many of the representations of suburbia’ explored in her book, Kenyon asks an intriguing question: ‘Is it possible to inhabit such a space without a nagging memory of some hidden violence embedded in that space itself?’ Kenyon, p.7.

<sup>34</sup> Kenyon, pp.2-6. Chapter one outlines the racist redlining practices adopted by Levitt and Sons and argues that state rollback has helped to generate a culture of private interest. Chapter two explores the rise of gated communities and engages the exclusionary practices of designers and residents’ associations. Chapter three considers a portrait of a fictional, L.A.-based disaster, rendered inevitable

to, and from, what Linda Hutcheon calls an ‘ex-centric’ position that captures America as a series of interlocking regions and micro-histories.<sup>35</sup> This is not to render the sprawling metropolitan landscape utopian in its burgeoning cosmopolitanism. As they assess the uneven development of suburbia, ongoing strains of anti-urbanism and more recent waves of inner-city re-gentrification, these representations trace the contributing role played by binaristic ways of thinking.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, by foregrounding heterogeneous and provisional cultures whilst refusing to essentialise experience, the ‘concept of alienated otherness’ begins to concede to the notion of ‘differences, that is to the assertion, not of centralised sameness, but of decentralised community – [a] postmodern paradox.’<sup>37</sup>

#### IV. Methodology

This is, by nature, an interdisciplinary study, which navigates the physical and dialectical complexities of sprawl by pitting a range of social, cultural and historical materials in dialogue, allowing fields as diverse as economic and spatial theory, cultural geography, literature, film and photography, sociological study and literary criticism to resonate with and inform one another. In doing so, it aims to foreground suburbia as a culturally significant site, whilst exposing its literature and film to more complex geographies and critical frameworks.

In its rejection of uncritical environmental determinism, interrogation of overly-simplistic narratives about white flight, and call for a clearer understanding of the forces that shape contemporary suburbia, this project builds upon the work of the New Suburban History.<sup>38</sup> Stemming from a 2006 collection of essays of the same

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by environmental abuse and underinvestment in social needs agendas. Chapter four analyses the origins of the cultural association of black urbanity with criminality in Detroit.

<sup>35</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p.57.

<sup>36</sup> Inner-city gentrification is now the principal locus of metropolitan development. The Associated Press, ‘Census Shows U.S. Cities are Booming, Suburbs are Wilting,’ *New York Daily News*, 5 April 2012 <<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/census-shows-u-s-cities-booming-suburbs-wilting-article-1.1056505>> [Accessed 5 February 2015].

In chapter one, I suggest that the early marketing of the suburb as an aspirational spatiality that offered a tonic to the dirt and hostility of the city created a false dichotomy between the two and galvanised socio-spatial change. In chapter four, I argue that ongoing, racist socio-cultural discourses about Detroit’s urban residents have played a fundamental role in perpetuating systemic injustices.

<sup>37</sup> Hutcheon, p.14.

<sup>38</sup> Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue (eds.), *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

name, edited by Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, this growing area of scholarship recognises suburbanisation as a complex process of ‘creating markets and politics out of ideology and material interest’ and the suburbs themselves as economically, ethnically, racially and socially variegated.<sup>39</sup> Informed by the movement’s leading examples – including Becky Nicolaides, Andrew Wiese, Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen – I demonstrate that suburban history ‘cannot be understood without close attention to the political and economic transformations that remade metropolitan America,’<sup>40</sup> and suggest that sprawl is a phenomenon produced as much by private developers, social theorists and economic systems as by the state. Furthermore, with this group, I recognise the importance of understanding place in terms of relations, and I thus pay close attention to ‘local conditions, individual choices, specific discourses [and] daily activities.’<sup>41</sup> Through an analysis of fiction and film, I demonstrate the mutability of suburban sites and their connectedness with wider economic networks and social and political developments, with the goal of facilitating a better understanding of matters relating to spatial justice.

Until recently, these mediums have not been a central feature of the New Suburban History. Increasingly, though, scholars are acknowledging that the cultural baggage attached to the word ‘suburban’ has led to unduly negative preconceptions about its art. While Tim Foster’s *Escaping the Split-Level Trap: Postsuburban Narratives in Recent American Fiction* (2012) and Kathy Knapp’s *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel After 9/11* (2014) turn to contemporary suburban fiction, Jo Gill’s *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (2013) explicates post-war suburban poetry ‘in terms of its formal properties, and of its relation to the larger cultural, historical, geographical, and ideological contexts in which it emerged and has been read.’<sup>42</sup> Though, as I will explain, this thesis does not use the term poetics solely to connote the art of writing, or theorising about, poetry, it has several

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<sup>39</sup> Robert O. Self, ‘California and the New Suburban History,’ *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2003), pp.127-134, p.129.

<sup>40</sup> Kruse and Sugrue, ‘Introduction: The New Suburban History,’ pp.1-10, p.8.

<sup>41</sup> John Archer, Paul J.P. Sandul and Katherine Solomonson (eds.), ‘Introduction,’ *Making Suburbia: New Histories of Everyday America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xvi.

<sup>42</sup> Jo Gill, *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.1. Other recent works that offer more nuanced assessments of contemporary suburban artforms include Karen Tongson’s, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (2011) and Timotheus Vermeulen’s, *Scenes from the Suburbs: The Suburb in Contemporary US Film and Television* (2014).

affinities with Gill's project. Namely, they share the premise that self-reflexivity has been a major feature of suburban literature since the close of the Second World War. Indeed, my engagement with John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960) and Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961) represents an attempt to rescue the complexity and self-consciousness of earlier realist fiction from claims that it advances static images of unchanging suburbs populated by homogenised masses.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, where Gill focusses on post-war American poetry which 'places the apparent unlikeness – even impossibility – of its own project (ironically) centre-stage' to question how one might 'find and develop a meaningful poetic and receptive readership in a context thought to be anathema to such an endeavour,' I dedicate the main part of my enquiry to more contemporary fiction and film that wrestles self-consciously with conundrums pertaining specifically to the slippery nature of sprawl.<sup>44</sup>

#### i. Timeframe

Following the first chapter's revisionist readings of pivotal suburban fictions, this project restricts its analysis to literary and filmic representations produced after 1990, examining the relationship between the period's radical socio-political, cultural and geographical transformation and significant changes in the suburban conversation. In line with Edward Soja, I observe in 1990s discourse a 'collision, a shift, a postmodern transition, a selective deconstruction and reconstitution' of our notions of 'reality and the material conditions and contexts of our lives,' which has so-far remained under-analysed in the context of fictions about a changing suburban landscape.<sup>45</sup> Though the precise nature of these collisions and shifts will be explored in detail in chapters one and two, I will say here that it is generally agreed that the 1990s experienced the coming-of-age of neoliberalism and the emergence of the U.S. as a lone superpower, with political policies responding to larger political shifts that the suburbs have come to be associated with.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, it represents a decade

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<sup>43</sup> This is a viewpoint shared by Joseph George, who argues that 'the critique and reimagining of suburbia found in *Revolutionary Road* is far more common than commentators have recognised.' Joseph George, *Postmodern Suburban Spaces: Philosophy, Ethics and Community in Postwar American Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.4.

<sup>44</sup> Gill, p.174.

<sup>45</sup> Edward W. Soja, 'Los Angeles, 1965-1992: From Crisis-Generated Restructuring to Restructuring-Generated Crisis,' *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Soja and Allen J. Scott (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp.426-462, p.451.

<sup>46</sup> Neoliberalism's coming-of-age can arguably be traced to Clinton's presidency in the U.S. and Blair's Third Way politics in the U.K. This period marked the naturalisation of market forces after

of declared endings – of the Cold War and, with it, of ‘history’ itself – and new continuities, as rapid economic expansion and deindustrialisation changed the shape of the American landscape and its role in the global marketplace.<sup>47</sup>

For Soja, ‘the spatial dimension of our lives has never been of greater practical and political relevance.’<sup>48</sup> In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996), he claims, ‘Whether we are attempting to deal with the increasing intervention of electronic media in our daily routines, seeking ways to act politically to deal with the growing problems of poverty, racism, sexual discrimination, and environmental degradation, we are becoming increasingly aware that we are, and have always been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities.’<sup>49</sup> Permeating each of the novels and films that I discuss is a sense of there being at least the *possibility* of rupture and change – whether realised or unfulfilled, destructive or personally and socially regenerative in ways that I will analyse – and it is this that justifies their inclusion. Consequently, they represent apt starting points for an endeavour to disentangle suburbia from its close, problematically univocal association with various hegemonic narratives.

In engaging fictions written during the 1990s, I automatically pit my work against Kathy Knapp’s otherwise-illuminating article and book on the post-9/11 suburban novel, the former of which claims that the 2001 terrorist attacks ‘punctured suburbia’s illusion of security and comfort and also presented an aesthetic and ethical challenge to writers who have returned to the suburbs in order to reassess middle-class experience in the context of large-scale disaster, which has rendered former notions of “home” suddenly obsolete.’<sup>50</sup> Knapp convincingly refutes the dominant strand of literary criticism, which characterises both pre- and post-9/11

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years of declining welfare provision. One consequence was the sharpening of economic inequality and the mushrooming of uneven, unchecked growth. For more information, see Doreen Massey, *World City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), pp.16-18.

<sup>47</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992), whose work I analyse in more detail in chapter two.

<sup>48</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), p.1.

<sup>49</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace*, p.1.

<sup>50</sup> Kathy Knapp, ‘Richard Ford’s Frank Bascombe Trilogy and the Post-9/11 Suburban Novel,’ *American Literary History*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (September 2011), pp.500-528, p.502.

fiction as inward-looking and domestic, and heralds the emergence of a new literary tradition, characterised by uncertainty. Yet, where Knapp proposes that post-9/11 fiction boasts ‘a depth of field that encompasses the personal and the political, the past and the future, and the Imaginary and the Real – all in order to forge a community of readers who are accountable to the larger world,’<sup>51</sup> I wish to identify many of the same traditions in pre-millennial fictions. Knapp makes a fitting analogy between the twin towers and the post-war suburbs as ‘powerful advertisement[s] of U.S. dominance to people around the globe,’ arguing that both have been recruited by novelists grappling with ‘the implications of the apparent decline of the United States’ economic, geo-political, and moral authority.’<sup>52</sup> It does not follow, however, that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 are solely responsible for shifting the priorities of suburban novelists away from the symbolic and towards what she calls the ‘suburban real.’<sup>53</sup>

I recognise that the historical delimitation of my argument and archive might expose this thesis to the same criticism. It is not my intention, however, to suggest that a single, watershed moment altered the course of suburban literature and film. In chapter one’s revisionist analysis of Richard Yates and Don DeLillo, I demonstrate that suburban fiction has *always* borne witness to major change and has long been engaged with the possibilities of creating new languages of identity, community and nationhood through an evolving suburban landscape – both imaginary and real. Part of my motivation, therefore, is to recover some of the neglected or actively misjudged fictions about suburban space that fall outside the strict periodisation of other projects, whilst unlocking the terrain for further enquiry. At the same time, in stressing that these earlier fictions critique existing imaginaries and invoke suburbia as a complex relational spatiality, I refuse any fixed and limiting equivalences between experimental or archetypal postmodern fiction and what have been termed ‘postmodern suburban spaces.’<sup>54</sup> An analysis of *Revolutionary Road* reveals that fiction traditionally defined as linear and realist is equally capable of depicting what Joseph George (2016) calls ‘the messy and contingent results of infinite individuals

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<sup>51</sup> Knapp, ‘Richard Ford’s Frank Bascombe Trilogy and the Post-9/11 Suburban Novel,’ p.502.

<sup>52</sup> Kathy Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel After 9/11* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), p.xiii.

<sup>53</sup> Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism*, p.19.

<sup>54</sup> See George, *Postmodern Suburban Spaces*.

sharing space with one another, making fractured and non-determining communities together.’<sup>55</sup> At the same time, I have already demonstrated that quintessentially postmodern texts by writers such as Bret Easton Ellis and Chuck Palahniuk are just as liable to be conservative in their engagements with suburban sprawl as their realist counterparts. Put simply, there is more than one way to disrupt narrative totalisation and naturalised modes of reading the American landscape. It is worth noting that, whilst I define the texts and films discussed in this project as radical and, to varying degrees, experimental, they have been variously labelled by critics as realist, dystopian and science fiction narratives, and have been drawn from both the marginal and the mass-market.

Thus, the poetics I identify is by no means limited to the archive I construct in this project and does not simply constitute a generally postmodern form combined with sprawl content or context. It refers to art that self-consciously inhabits a liminal and contested terrain, metafictionally mediating between the axes of realism and experimentalism, narrative cohesion and disruption, internal coherence and contingency, and attempting to suture the more radical elements of the two as it grapples with a changing American landscape. I argue that, since the early 1990s, and concurrent with the pervasive social, cultural, geographical and political shifts detailed above, there has been an increasingly distinct foregrounding of these mediations in fiction and film. Embracing a language that unsettles the subject it describes, even as they attend to spatial and historical specificity, these works willingly uphold the paradoxes and contradictions involved in challenging rationalism and seeking more relational narratives of being and belonging. Far from suggesting that reflexive art makes taking a political position impossible or is destructive of humanistic endeavours, this project positions it as a potentially unifying force, capable of connecting local actions to broader histories.

## ii. Loci

This thesis owes a debt of inspiration to Tim Foster, whose illuminating revisionist readings of suburban fictions such as *Revolutionary Road* (1961) explore myriad instances in which literary criticism has flattened the fictional suburban landscape

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<sup>55</sup> George, p.5.



into a universal and symbolic domain. In *Escaping the Split-Level Trap: Postsuburban Narratives in Recent American Fiction* (2012), Foster embraces Lefebvre's concept of space as contested and socially produced as a starting point for reconsidering fictional narratives that represent suburban space as open and unrestricted, and therefore subject to change and reanalysis. However, Foster's reference to both the fictions he examines and the complex metropolitan landscape with which they engage as 'Postsuburban,' is somewhat thorny. Arguably, applying the term to both the material and literary domain usefully acknowledges that 'American fiction writers are tackling the same questions as some geographers and urban theorists,' and invites dialogue between the two.<sup>56</sup> Further, the 'post' prefix evokes the conscious, often parodic, acts of deconstruction carried out by authors in search of a new language to describe the changing landscape. However, whilst the word might prove appropriate to a conceptualisation of the more fluid geographical and discursively complex entity of twenty-first-century sprawl, its application to the post-war suburb is problematic when one considers that this space can be more clearly demarcated as a material environment.

Since its inception, suburbia has resounded in the American national consciousness as a richly polyphonic locus of meaning, both subjective idea and objective reality, palimpsest and microcosm of the similarly complex dominant culture. It is also, unlike a mythical utopia or dystopia, fundamentally real. During this project, as I rove across diverse landscapes, I address the specific and shifting suburban imaginaries attached to Arizona, Westchester, Los Angeles and Detroit. Only one of the works I examine does not name its location, and this deliberate invocation of placelessness will be discussed in chapter three. I begin my enquiry into late-twentieth-century suburban fiction by inhabiting the predominantly white middle-class suburb of Westchester, the setting of some of the most influential novels of the 1950s and 60s. In the following chapters, I move through Los Angeles and Detroit, encountering very different – though no less stubborn and enduring – symbolic ecologies, and consider how, and why, the relationship between their urban, suburban, and rural spaces is being so urgently contested and reconfigured.

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<sup>56</sup> Tim Foster, *Escaping the Split-Level Trap: Postsuburban Narratives in Recent American Fiction* (Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Nottingham, July 2012), p.4.

The choice of loci can partly be attributed to William H. Frey's 2002 claim that twenty-first-century America can be divided into three loose demographic categories: The New Sunbelt, The Melting Pot and The Heartland.<sup>57</sup> The first, which includes Arizona, boasts the fastest growing suburbs and features the highest percentage of intact two-parent families. Meanwhile, The Melting Pot of California and New York is experiencing growth primarily through immigration, and is residence to 75% of the nation's Hispanic and Asian populations. Finally, The Heartland – of which Detroit is part – trails in population growth, is comprised of a disproportionate number of aging baby boomers, and is blighted by the most severe racial stratification along urban-suburban lines. This project also plots a loose trajectory from the furthest reaches of ex-urban sprawl in Wells Tower's desert 'utopia' to the blighted urban core of Alvarez, Mitchell and Jarmusch's Detroit, via the wealthy, outer-ring suburb of Homes' Westchester, the rather more frayed commuter-belt of Dutton's *SPRAWL*, and the vast, polycentric landscape that is Yamashita's Los Angeles. Attending to such diversity renders it practically impossible to universalise experience in any meaningful way.

Nevertheless, for all this attention to detail, this project is less concerned with rigid cartographic assessments of specific sites than with the way individuals and communities negotiate the complex relationship between self and society, local and global, in an increasingly decentred modern world. In conceptualising sprawl in this way, the writers and filmmakers addressed successfully evoke the American landscape as neither a rigidly defended territory nor a postmodern abyss.<sup>58</sup> Instead, it emerges as an entity in flux: an ideal space in which to analyse the 'centrifugal and centripetal forces' of globalisation as they 'conflict and converge: local and global, rural and urban, homogenization and heterogenization.'<sup>59</sup> Although the following chapters will engage several terms frequently ascribed to the complex twenty-first-

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<sup>57</sup> William H. Frey, 'Metro Magnets for Minorities and Whites: Melting Pots, the New Sunbelt, and the Heartland,' *PSC Research Report* No. 02-496 (2002), N.pg., as qtd. by David Brooks, *The Paradise Suite: Bobos in Paradise and On Paradise Drive* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p.9.

<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Tim Foster's project sets out to 'reject the fatalism implicit in the assumption that the supposedly inhibiting nature of the suburbs has simply been subsumed into a late-capitalist, postmodern void.' Foster, p.22.

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Dix, Brian Jarvis and Paul Jenner, *The Contemporary American Novel in Context* (London: Continuum 2011), p.123.

century metropolis – including commuter belt and inner-ring suburb – they do so mainly when prompted by the novels and films themselves, with the view that the choice of term might offer a crucial insight into the motivations of character and/or author. Ultimately, whilst studiously avoiding reductive analyses of a complex and evolving terrain, this thesis adopts the term ‘sprawl’ – a word that at once signals proliferation, extension, essentialization and collapse – for its title because it captures the ambivalent, amorphous and heteroglossic nature of the contemporary landscape and its fiction, whilst signaling a necessary break from past structures, both imaginative and material.

Following Timotheus Vermeulen, I do not intend to measure ‘representations to “reality” along the lines of true and false, objective and subjective, “realistic” and unrealistic,’ since representation and reality – though capable of influencing one another dialectically – ‘are not of the same order.’<sup>60</sup> Instead, I strive to consider the fictional landscape on its own terms, examining what it reveals about developments within the discursive realm. Certainly, suburban sprawl as a definable physical reality and fictional narratives which engage with it represent differing responses to the same shared conditions and contexts, and, viewed together, may reveal much about the experience of inhabiting its spaces. However, it is worth stressing that architecture and literature are not the same; they are distinct and separate disciplines, and to seek to prove the influence of one upon the other would be speculative at best. Whilst architecture, and the urban theory that accompanies it, intends to intervene in reality in some way, fiction is not duty-bound to act as a prototype for material change. With its separation from reality assumed, it is free to engage with physical space and its role in ordinary experience as much as it chooses. Similarly, whilst an enacted politics with an agenda *has* to state its case, fiction is at liberty to take a more deconstructive approach. Of course, this is not to suggest that literature *never* endeavours to intervene in this way: in the conclusion to this thesis, I consider the pitfalls of Jonathan Franzen’s so-called ‘instructional’ literature, arguing that his practices risk reducing both imaginative and material spaces. In contrast, the novels and films that I discuss in the body of this project all resist totalising discourses and

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<sup>60</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen, *Scenes from the Suburbs: The Suburb in Contemporary US Film and Television* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.4.

challenge the power structures that the suburban spatial mythology has supported. This project is committed to determining how.

### iii. Fictions and Films

Nevertheless, I mean to do more than simply attend to the deconstructive possibilities of language and fictionality, or embrace literature's fundamental 'undecideability,' not least because I refuse to limit my inquiry to the written word.<sup>61</sup> In *Acts of Literature* (1991), Jacques Derrida proposes that there may be something intrinsic to literature that challenges assumptions about essence, identity and authenticity. 'Literary theory, or poetics, has always consciously worked under the sign of philosophy,'<sup>62</sup> claims editor Derek Attridge. It tends to prioritise a text's thematic content over its method of articulation, and often seeks to identify a single political, aesthetic or cultural source or goal. By the close of chapter one, I hope to have demonstrated that the dominant strand of suburban literary criticism has, with a few recent exceptions, viewed the fictional suburban landscape through as reductive and distorting a lens as 1950s social science did the physical landscape it described. Such narrow ascriptions cannot help but allow all sorts of exclusions, assumptions and binary oppositions to flourish, and it is arguably because of the persistence of more blinkered views of the suburbs themselves that fictions that deal with more complex, challenging visions of suburbia – or sprawl – have been neglected altogether.

Still, according to Derrida, literature will *always* exceed a critic's ability to freeze it, regardless of its content or the intentions of its author, because its very fictionality renders mimesis impossible. Unlike legal language, literature is 'an experience rather than an essence,' he writes.<sup>63</sup> Its 'meaning' – if it has one – is mutable and subject to revision each time a reader, who cannot be essentialised, takes it on. For Derrida, it is precisely literature's indefinite incompleteness that makes it ethical, since it takes 'responsibility toward the future,' by creating 'openings within which the Other can

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<sup>61</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (Routledge: London and New York, 1992), p.24.

<sup>62</sup> Attridge, paraphrasing Derrida, p.3.

<sup>63</sup> Derrida, p.45.

come to transform what we know or think we know.’<sup>64</sup> Anything ‘without a suspended relation to meaning and reference’ is simply not literature.<sup>65</sup>

Whilst I would agree that we must resist being called ‘back to extremely determinate responsibilities’ when we appraise fiction, it does not follow that all fiction is of equal ethical import or subjectable to the same practices of deconstruction.<sup>66</sup>

Derrida’s privileging of literature renders any enquiry into the specificities of form and content virtually meaningless. Though he concedes that literary analysis remains viable providing the critic attends to the relationship between ‘singularity and generality,’ *Acts of Literature* largely avoids discussion of individual texts.<sup>67</sup>

Moreover, Derrida’s side-lining of authorial intention and communicative function, and his embrace of a radical instability, could be considered academically elitist in the face of systemic injustices to which fiction and film may wish to speak. How, then, might one honour literature and film as expressive mediums without succumbing to the same fate? Further, how do the works themselves succeed in being critically and inquisitively nomadic, as opposed to static and essentialist, without relinquishing their stabilising functions altogether and embracing a fluidity that is ultimately neoliberal?<sup>68</sup>

The following texts and films cannot be assimilated into a single genre, though none could be feasibly termed realist in the conventional literary sense. Rather, they are subversive, parodic, ironic and full of surprises. Like Derrida’s quintessential literature, each ‘induce[s] a certain historical instability,’ and all offer rich potentiality for re-readings that would allow different discourses and events to step into the light.<sup>69</sup> Yet I will contend that their experimental aspects do not negate any claims to realism, or paper over their links to material histories. Nor is it possible for

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<sup>64</sup> Attridge, paraphrasing Derrida, p.5.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, p.48.

<sup>66</sup> Derrida, p.45.

<sup>67</sup> Derrida acknowledges that ‘if the literary text were absolutely singular each time we encountered it, it would have no access to the human world at all; its readability, its possession of ‘meaning’ however subject to change across the particular instances of reading and interpretation, implies a repetition, a law, an ideality of some type. Thus, to be interpretable any literary genre must belong to a genre or a number of genres, a set of generalised conventions which guide reading.’ Derrida, p.15.

<sup>68</sup> See chapter three for a detailed discussion of these issues. Briefly, notions of ‘fluidity’ and ‘flexibility’ risk feeding the language of neoliberal subjectivity and the emphasis on the entrepreneurial self.

<sup>69</sup> Derrida, p.46.

them to simply resist implication in certain dominant relations of power, even as they might seek to problematise them. These works are neither exclusively didactic nor entirely self-reflexive. Instead, they foreground – in unique ways – the fact that both the production and reception of their art forms is part of ‘an entire communication situation which includes the social, ideological, historical, and aesthetic contexts in which those processes and that product exist.’<sup>70</sup> Put simply, I will argue that these novels and films foreground scepticism and deconstruction, but not to the extent that deconstruction becomes the only possible mode of analysis.

## V. The Poetics of Sprawl

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1989), Linda Hutcheon stresses that ‘a poetics of postmodernism would not set up a hierarchy that might privilege either theory or practice. It would not make them either autonomous or parasitic.’<sup>71</sup> Instead, it would endeavour to surmount the traditional boundaries between art and life, exchanging the ‘sense of uniqueness, closure and authority once demanded of theory (as well as art)’ for ‘intertextual play and the admission of intellectual contingency.’<sup>72</sup> To an extent, this project strives to do the same. However, neither I nor the novels and films I discuss take for granted the unproblematic nature of such a crossing. Both Hutcheon’s text and Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1958) find echoes in my work. Their emphasis on art as a medium uniquely capable of capturing the complexity of the present, and Hutcheon’s insistence that culture is not a privileged terrain that is somehow separable from material reality, is central to my own thesis. The following chapters consider the scope for articulating a poetics of sprawl that embraces the ‘postmodern transgressing of previously accepted limits: those of particular arts, of genres, of art itself.’<sup>73</sup>

There are, however, as many points of divergence between their work and my own as there are convergences, and I intend to problematise and intervene in their poetic practices, attending with equal rigour to the *politics* of a poetics of sprawl. On one hand, Bachelard’s emphasis on architectural places as lived experiences, and his

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<sup>70</sup> Hutcheon, p.40.

<sup>71</sup> Hutcheon, p.50.

<sup>72</sup> Hutcheon, p.54.

<sup>73</sup> Hutcheon, p.9.

attention to the affective responses various spaces engender in literature and in life, is central to my work. His insistence that ‘space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent, subject to the measure and estimates of the surveyor’ because ‘it has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination,’ is a reminder that narrative plays a fundamental role in the formation of spaces, since the very process of articulating the boundaries and interconnections between one space and another brings it into being.<sup>74</sup> In this respect, Bachelard is affiliated with Michel de Certeau, who claims that where literature dries up, ‘there is a loss of space: deprived of narrations, [...] the group or the individual regresses toward the disquieting, fatalistic experience of a formless, indistinct and nocturnal totality.’ He concludes, ‘the story’s first function is to authorise, or more exactly, to found.’<sup>75</sup>

In his suggestion that the creative image is a point of origin, Bachelard emerges as a forerunner to Critical Regionalism; an approach spearheaded by Neil Campbell and Kathleen Stewart, whose work I celebrate for using affect theory as a route into more nuanced spiritual geographies, but which I also problematise.<sup>76</sup> Chapter three calls attention to Bachelard’s implicit anti-urbanism and cultural elitism in his suggestion that only old houses, with the basements and attics that are notoriously absent from both urban tenement buildings and low-density sprawl, can generate and sustain aesthetic pleasure. Meanwhile, chapter four – which analyses the urban photography of Yves Marchand, Romain Meffre, Camilo Jose Vergara and Andrew Moore alongside contemporary horror cinema – implicitly refutes Bachelard’s privileging of literature (and particularly poetry), revealing it to be a curtailment of the critical range of poetics.

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<sup>74</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p.xxxii.

<sup>75</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Stephen F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.124.

<sup>76</sup> Affect theory in philosophy and critical theory centralises the importance of bodily experience, movement and sensation, as well as human interaction, in understanding cultural formations and roles. The affective turn in the humanities and social sciences can be roughly traced to the year 2000, and refers to a movement towards exploring experiences and sensations that fall outside the dominant representational paradigms of semiotics and rhetoric. For more information, see Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

My relationship with *A Poetics of Postmodernism* is both more favourable and more complex. Like Hutcheon, I take issue with ‘apocalyptic wailing about the decline of the west’ under the economic systems of ‘late capitalism,’ and query the imaginative mapping of these views onto sprawl’s forms by urban theorists such as James Howard Kunstler.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, in the realm of art, I too embrace the notion that there has been a recent, energetic turn towards a ‘rethinking of margins and edges, of what does not fit in the humanly constructed notion of centre.’<sup>78</sup> Similarly, I acknowledge the radical potential of narratives that ‘question centralised, totalised, hierarchicalised, closed systems,’ and refute the notion that postmodernism is characterised by the absolute disintegration of coherence and order in response to particular social and economic circumstances.<sup>79</sup> Hutcheon’s figurative language of ex-centricity makes her work particularly conducive to this project’s tentative embrace of the creative and aesthetic potential of sprawl and the discursive shifts it has engendered.

However, in naming this project *The Poetics of Sprawl*, I do not wish to suggest that postmodern literature and what are often considered to be the ‘postmodern’ aspects of sprawl’s material spaces (namely its unregulated growth, declining welfare provisions and architectures of impermanence), make them counterparts in any direct way. Postmodernism is not a univocal concept – it is plural. As I have already suggested, writers and urban planners are not directly equivalent. In fact, there are many more moments of opposition and tension than connection, and the discourse between them is interesting. Whilst certain theorists invoke postmodernism as a disorientating and entirely negative experience, Hutcheon comes dangerously close to painting an all-too-sunny alternative: an unproblematic likening of postmodern practices in architecture and urban planning to postmodernism in literature, which neglects the very real material struggles on the ground experienced by those inhabiting increasingly precarious spaces.<sup>80</sup> Thus, where Hutcheon mounts an equivocal defence of postmodern architecture by insisting that its evocation of past forms is not merely nostalgic, but is rather ‘a useful response to the death of

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<sup>77</sup> Hutcheon, p.ix.

<sup>78</sup> Hutcheon, p.42.

<sup>79</sup> Hutcheon, p.42.

<sup>80</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Violence of the Global,’ and – for a more nuanced assessment of postmodernism – Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society.’



modernist “heroism” and a return to history that is ‘partly parodic’ and formally expressive of ‘a belief in change within continuity,’ this thesis insists on specificity, arguing that even aesthetically postmodern architectural practices that claim to be ‘historically aware, hybrid, and inclusive’ can be implicated in processes of social engineering.<sup>81</sup>

Throughout this project, I resist the temptation to label suburban sprawl as ‘redemptive’ in any unequivocal way. This is not to posit poetics as inherently *opposed* to ordinary life, as though the latter can only be defined by architecture and a series of objectively verifiable facts. Art in general, and the metaphors and symbolism it contains, offers valuable tools with which to conceptualise and ground individual experiences of the outside world. Yet one must be wary of positing sprawl’s physical forms *as* poetry. What I *am* suggesting is that suburbia, and the sprawl that it has become, has long served as a valuable, complex spatiality in which to *imaginatively* negotiate issues that extend far beyond its buildings and streets. It is my premise that there is an ongoing value in creatively confronting the issues that it brings to light, and in seeking new, more open structures with which to interpret it.

Architectural theorist Aaron Betsky argues that ‘sprawl constitutes both the unplanned deterritorialisation of physical structures and modernity’s urban given; it registers the contemporary city’s picturesque inclination to a heterology and centrifuge whose resonant inclination is to de-frame.’<sup>82</sup> And like Betsky, my concern in this project is ‘not how to stop sprawl, but how to use its composition, its nodes and its leaky spaces’ to create a kind of architecture of the imagination.<sup>83</sup>

## VI. Structure

Chapter one traces the evolution of American suburbia, as a material reality and as a socio-political ideology, from 1945 to the present, exploring its intimate links to the historical and ongoing transformation of the American national idea. It argues that the mass production of standardised suburban housing that took place during the 1950s established American suburbia as physically and conceptually unique. As well

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<sup>81</sup> Hutcheon, p.26, p.32 and p.30. See chapter one’s discussion of New Urbanism.

<sup>82</sup> Aaron Betsky, *Architecture Must Burn* (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2000), unpaginated.

<sup>83</sup> Betsky, unpaginated.

as contributing to the growth of the middle class, this period of rapid development generated a series of sociological studies whose impact on cultural understandings of suburbia can be seen to this day. I examine the geo-political, economic, cultural and historical conjunctures that helped to create and sustain debilitating associations of suburban space with stasis, closure and fixed identities, and propose that by persistently invoking the white middle-class suburbanite as a victim of shadowy socio-spatial organisations, early social studies helped to validate an exclusionary culture of possessive individualism. In addition to exposing and deconstructing the myriad dichotomies that have dominated conceptualisations of suburban space, this chapter also rejects the restrictive categories frequently assigned to suburban fiction and explores possibilities for more nuanced critical frameworks. By reappraising two seminal suburban novels published between 1960 and 1990 – Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road* (1961) and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) – I argue that literature has *long* played a varied and fundamental role in shaping and mediating understandings of suburban geographies and the reciprocal relationship between individual and environment. In an age in which the literary-critical construct and the object with which it engages have drifted so far apart, I contend that there has never been a more urgent time to re-negotiate their historic and continuing relationship.

Chapter two explores the increasingly fraught nature of suburban place identification in late-1990s and early millennial fictions, examining in detail the lingering potency of inherited cultural myths and ideological imperatives in two fictional depictions, A.M. Homes’ novel, *Music for Torching* (1999), and Wells Tower’s short story, ‘Raw Water’ (2010). Refusing the dystopian projection of these texts, I stress that the authors’ own relationship with these myths and symbols is both conscious and evaluative, and argue that Homes and Tower use parody, satire and irony to move beyond binaristic models of thinking about suburbia as either an enervating spatiality or a meaningless void. I posit that late twentieth-century fiction is not, as numerous critics have declared, in a state of implosion, but is instead consciously negotiating its knotted socio-cultural and literary inheritance, staging deliberately unsettling oscillations between various poles associated with suburban development – nostalgia and cynicism, tradition and innovation – as it searches for a new language that does justice to suburbia’s complexity. Nevertheless, I conclude by suggesting that Homes’

novel might be read as a self-consciously anxious text that recognises the problems of advocating a purely imaginative opting-out of various ideological imperatives.

In chapter three, the ethical corollaries of invoking a poetics of sprawl take centre-stage. In Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and Danielle Dutton's *SPRAWL* (2010), stereotypes that once decried the fixity of the suburbs have ostensibly been turned on their heads, with characters yearning for a modicum of the stability that had previously been portrayed as stultifying. I argue that the protagonists' inability to map themselves and their surroundings using stable, encoded coordinates paves the way for the emergence of more flexible, less neoliberal, ways of being and belonging. In *SPRAWL*, the narrator must learn to connect the personal to the social, not through abstract ideals, but through imagination, interaction and direct observation. Whilst part one examines the efficacy of Dutton's attempts to avoid invoking a 'celebratory poetics of the everyday,' part two moves beyond the envisioned crises of the suburban individual and family unit to examine a transnational narrative set in Los Angeles' sprawling suburbs.<sup>84</sup> Of such fictions, Andrew Dix et al. wonder whether 'the nimble geographical and cultural movements of the postcolonial nomad become a paradigm for a deterritorialised neoliberal subjectivity.'<sup>85</sup> Taking up this concern, I consider the ways in which *Tropic of Orange* avoids substituting place-making for more romantic or postmodern notions of movement, fragmentation and diaspora; concepts that might risk re-inscribing dominant colonial discourses associated with suburban development. Blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, history and magical realism, nation state and evolving world system, Yamashita accommodates the contexts, histories and desires that reside in an environment once believed to anaesthetise its homogenised inhabitants. Using L.A.'s paradigmatic sprawl to renegotiate the relationship between the local and the global, she invokes what Tim Foster calls a 'differentiated, localised postmodernity,' embedded in individual experience.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Vermeulen, p.3.

<sup>85</sup> Dix, Jarvis and Jenner, p.117.

<sup>86</sup> Foster, p.23.

In chapter four, I journey into two thus-far uncharted locations; the medium of film and the geography of the urban ‘core,’ around which suburbia has been physically and imaginatively structured. From these new vantage points, I re-examine the suburbs, and consider the extent to which contemporary horror – long thought to intersect with a discourse that *validates* specifically white middle-class anti-urbanism – in fact seeks to expose the real causes of inner-city decline and its knock-on effects on the suburbs. Instead of embracing the narratives that have supported the historic and ongoing flight of capital and people from Detroit’s inner city, I contend that *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2014, dir. Jim Jarmusch), *It Follows* (2015, dir. David Robert Mitchell) and *Don’t Breathe* (2016, dir. Fede Alvarez) force viewers into confrontation with the repressed processes that have contributed to Detroit’s decline: the failure of state and market forces, enforced segregation and a culture of fear. The new millennium has experienced a surge of projects focussed primarily on the regeneration and repopulation of the older metropolitan core. Particularly notable amongst these are the New Regionalist design projects that attempt to fuse the scale of the city with the qualities traditionally associated with residential suburbs, thereby transforming inner city areas into ‘new towns.’ As white suburbanites migrate en-masse to ‘ruined’ cities like Detroit, they risk pushing black and Hispanic communities to the increasingly neglected suburbs, thereby re-establishing older forms of ghettoization. Through my closing analysis of *Only Lovers Left Alive*, I expose the imagined effects of these processes of urban gentrification, painting a portrait of white middle-class drifters who, though ostensibly living in a post-racial society, literally suck the blood of black and working-class Detroiters, disposing of them in the name of neoliberal opportunity.

Before beginning this project’s textual and filmic analysis, I intend to offer a brief introduction to suburbia’s geographical and cultural development. Although I hope that this will serve as invaluable background, I do not wish to suggest that the novels and films addressed thereafter should be read merely as representative products of a particular time and material realm. Far from simply reflecting or mapping out an existing material environment, or offering didactic imperatives for future action, these fictions might be considered active spatialities in their own right; they are sites of both socio-political conflict and resolution that negotiate ‘national’ imperatives, reconfigure inherited suburban imagery and imaginatively construct new spaces.

Meanwhile, their characters are not the alienated victims of a constrictive and deterministic spatiality, but participants in the imaginative and material deconstruction and transformation of their conceptual, social and material circumstances. Following David Harvey, it is my contention that film and literature have the capacity to 'represent the daily qualities of lives in ways that could not be handled or grasped by other means. [...] There are always choices and possibilities, perpetually unresolved tensions and differences, subtle shifts in structures of feeling all of which stand to alter the terms of debate and political action.' What these cultural representations offer is 'a more fluid sense of what it means to be in-place.'<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p.168.

## 1. Navigating the Binaries: Reappraising the Construction of American Suburbia

This chapter re-evaluates the development of American suburbia – as both physical entity and symbolic structure – and argues that fictional narratives offer valuable tools with which to engage its role in shaping U.S. politics, geography and culture. It charts the evolution of a rigidly theorised, place-based phenomenon into a conceptually fluid and geographically disputed sprawl, and contends that this landscape illuminates the complex, contested reality of twenty-first-century America. Undertaking a revisionist analysis of the myriad ways in which suburbia has been constructed and classified – according to ‘political status [...] economic and social function [...] landscape and built environment, [...] ideology and way of life’ – it stresses the perils of attempting a just and all-inclusive definition, and the virtue of fiction’s continuing exploration of these shifting ecologies.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I partially embrace Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese’s 2006 definition of suburbanisation as an ongoing *process* of ‘decentralisation’ of jobs, housing and political consensus ‘from older urban cores’ in order that I might successfully encompass the ‘range of communities and functions that this process produced.’<sup>2</sup> However, I also understand contemporary suburbia as a mediating spatiality between various polarities, and, as such, I move backwards and forwards between city and suburb, local and global, pitting the two in dialogue. That suburbia is a ‘terrain of conflict as well as consensus, [whose] forms reflect as well as reinforce these influences’ will be central to my own analysis of its complex evolution in fiction and reality.<sup>3</sup> By interpreting suburban fiction as a medium that self-consciously inhabits a liminal and contested terrain – situating itself somewhere between myth and locatable reality, inherited narrative and unfolding experience – I endeavour to broaden the scope of what might be recognised as a suburban novel, and pave the way for the later chapters’ analyses of fictions and films perhaps not previously defined as such. In claiming that space is socially produced and structured

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<sup>1</sup> Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, *The Suburb Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolaides and Wiese, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolaides and Wiese, p.6.

by multiple discourses, I intend to demonstrate the radical discursive potential of these art forms to ‘dramatise and even provoke change from within mass culture.’<sup>4</sup>

Following a brief outline of the nineteenth-century origins of American suburbia – in which I argue that suburbanisation was mediated and shaped by a distinctly American anti-urbanism and pastoral mythology from the outset – section one provides an in-depth analysis of the post-war, mass-produced suburb. In doing so, it aims to demonstrate that this particular manifestation of suburbia has played, and continues to play, a crucial role in the socio-cultural construction of America. Indeed, though this chapter will stress that the suburban landscape has always been economically and physically varied, it argues that the explosion of standardised housing, spearheaded by Levitt and Sons, gave rise to a series of hugely influential social studies that continue to exert an influence on cultural conceptions of suburbia to this day. Sections two and three interrogate the most prominent of these sociological perspectives, emphatically distinguishing between the hyperbolic 1950s works of David Riesman, William H. Whyte and John Keats – which posit that the physical and social structure of the centrally planned suburbs incubated a homogenised, conformist culture – and their more nuanced 1960s counterparts. In section two, I argue that early social studies that painted white middle-class suburbanites as victims were partly responsible for reifying a culture of territorial individualism. Meanwhile, section three reconsiders the often-neglected enquiries of William M. Dobriner, Bennett M. Berger and Herbert Gans, uncovering in their work either implicit or explicit criticisms of their predecessors’ imprecision and failure to imagine scope for social change or political agitation against the status quo.<sup>5</sup> Far from perpetuating notions of an enervating, dystopian spatiality, these later studies recognise suburbia as both a physical terrain *and* a socially and culturally produced narrative, subject to ongoing revisions.

Section four examines the material, social and political status of suburbia at the dawn of the twenty-first century, scrutinising the growing popularity of the gated

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p.7.

<sup>5</sup> For another exploration of the work of Dobriner, Berger and Gans, see Tim Foster, *Escaping the Split-Level Trap: Postsuburban Narratives in Recent American Fiction* (Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Nottingham, July 2012), pp.17-24.

community alongside New Urbanist ‘cures’ for sprawl. It complicates the univocally negative connotations of the word sprawl, identifying an ongoing strain of discursive nostalgia in urban theory that laments the loss of a small-town communalism that never truly existed. Whilst sensitive to the myriad problems associated with low-density, poorly regulated, multi-nucleated sprawl, I argue that the ‘moral’ condemnation of strip-malls and affordable subdivisions frequently disguises an ugly classism and racial bias, along with a tendency to prioritise aesthetics over democratic potential; a propensity that has influenced the rise of the gated community. In the panicked rhetoric of urban theorist James Howard Kunstler, I hear echoes of early social studies’ exaggerated fears about mass culture and the dissolution of neat binary categorisations of suburb and city. This section also problematises the New Urbanist solution to socio-economic stratification and the rise of privatised micro-states, arguing that it too is governed by nostalgia for an imagined, socially cohesive past, and does little to negotiate the dialectical inconsistencies in America’s national narrative that have been exposed by suburban development.

In their 2014 collection of essays, *New Suburban Stories*, editors Martin Dines and Timotheus Vermeulen concede that ‘it is perhaps no wonder that the parameters of the suburban story are hard to delineate, given that no one seems to agree even on what constitutes a suburb.’<sup>6</sup> Yet this is not for want of trying. Later in this chapter, I turn to twentieth-century suburban fiction and literary criticism, considering the ways in which certain critics have defended the fictional territory of suburbia using many of the same techniques as early sociologists and urban theorists. On one hand, in claiming that suburban fiction is reliant upon a ‘restrictive, binary system [...] – with suburbia emerging as either the harmonious model of community [...] or the inversion of that dream vision’ – the critics I discuss seem to exclude those authors who do not conform to this model, and risk creating a false genre.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, they reduce the complex, open discourses of the novels *within* their consensus to

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Dines and Timotheus Vermeulen (eds.), *New Suburban Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.4.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century Fiction and Film* (New York: Macmillan, 2004), p.14. Having suggested here that the notion of a single ‘genre’ is inadequate to a discussion of suburban fiction, I will henceforth use the term with scare quotes to emphasise my awareness of its limitations.



little more than parodic embodiments of suburban stereotypes. Far from imagining suburbia as a stagnant mire of inactivity – a closed, dystopian system, governed by top-down structures and directives that are entirely non-negotiable on the ground – I argue that many post-war novelists conceive of it as evolving and fundamentally renegotiable. Understanding that space is shaped by its inhabitants as much as by blueprints and political policies may appear common-sensical, but it is a point that I will reveal to be frequently disdained or disregarded by other forms of suburban discourse, addressed hereafter.

A brief, revisionist analysis of two novels – *Revolutionary Road* (1961) and *White Noise* (1985) – reveals a far more nuanced vision of suburban experience than has heretofore been perceived, and paves the way for this project's exploration of new suburban imaginaries. I refute both the dominant critical view that the late-twentieth-century suburban novel is in a self-conscious state of nihilistic implosion and Kathy Knapp's more nuanced claim that certain fictions cannibalise themselves with an apocalyptic 'return to history.'<sup>8</sup> I propose, instead, that many of the novelists criticised by Knapp and her contemporaries in fact favour an uneasy oscillation between internal coherence and contingency, depicting characters that *do* have a degree of real agency, but who have nevertheless struggled – partly due to their unwillingness to navigate the binaristic master narratives that have blighted suburbia – to take responsibility for themselves and others.

## **I. Suburban Histories, 1925-1960**

American suburban expansion gained momentum during the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, when developments in transportation technology, a rising urban population and an availability of cheap land on the peripheries of the nation's cities generated 'an exodus that would turn cities inside out.'<sup>9</sup> In 1925, in the first comprehensive analysis of the American suburbs, Harlan Douglass described these variegated landscapes as differing 'so manifestly [...] from one another that even the

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<sup>8</sup> Kathy Knapp, 'Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe Trilogy and the Post-9/11 Suburban Novel,' *American Literary History*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (September 2011), pp.500-528, p.500.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 19.

most generalised account of their character [...] could not ignore the fact.’<sup>10</sup> At that time, industrial outposts and upper-class retreats were both recognised as burgeoning suburban developments, and once-independent towns had been redefined as ‘railroad suburbs’ when innovations in transport connected them to the urban core. Despite this variety, these spatial formations generated only a scant number of fairly simplistic ecological portraits of an expanding urban centre. According to Albert Hunter, the dominant perspective advanced during the early twentieth century was that ‘city and suburb were intimately linked into a single reality;’ a ‘metropolitan economy’ that grew with the construction of new communities and the incorporation of older ones.<sup>11</sup> Whilst analysts recognised the economic and physical diversity of these developments, most did not acknowledge that suburbia was *already* a distinct symbolic terrain; a new Promised Land produced by – and increasingly productive of – a perceived urban malaise.<sup>12</sup>

Contemporary fiction told a different story. In 1925, John Dos Passos tapped into a growing fear of the overpopulation, pollution and social indifference of urban centres in his novel *Manhattan Transfer*. Since the arrival of the first European settlers in the seventeenth century, America had been habitually touted as a sublime wilderness awaiting domestication by brave and innovative pioneers. Where a lack of space had been deemed responsible for hindering the Enlightenment project of individual and collective progress in European countries, the vast American landscape was imagined to represent limitless opportunity. The inevitable consequence of an emphasis on the appropriation of land and resources, however, was a rapid industrialisation that shook the foundations on which the ‘American national character’ was constructed. As industrial endeavours brought immigrants and rural citizens to the urban centres, at once augmenting capitalist enterprise and creating cramped conditions and racial tensions, the association of democratic, capitalistic progress with light and space was rendered increasingly geographically and

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<sup>10</sup> Harlan Paul Douglass, *The Suburban Trend* (New York: Century Company, 1925), p.74, as qtd. by Jon C. Teaford, *The American Suburb: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p.43.

<sup>11</sup> Albert Hunter, ‘The Symbolic Ecology of Suburbia,’ *Neighbourhood and Community Environments*, ed. by Irwin Altman and Abraham Wandersman (New York: Plenum Press, 1987), pp.12-20, p.13.

<sup>12</sup> For an exception, see George A. Lundberg and others, *Leisure: A Suburban Study* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), as qtd. by Hunter, p.13. According to Hunter, this study argues that suburbanites exhibited a longing for domesticity, nature and an escape from the urban.

ideologically problematic. Praised by Ernest Hemingway for showing ‘Europeans the America they *really* find when they come here,’ *Manhattan Transfer* portrayed New York City as seductive and dynamic, but ultimately unforgiving; a city whose exigencies contorted its inhabitants into miserable, alienated workers.<sup>13</sup>

Responding to urban fatigue and capitalising on cheap peripheral land, property developers started to turn away from densifying the urban core and began constructing elite, single-family enclaves on the edge of the nation’s major cities. Built from the ground up, according to harmonising principles such as curved roads, expansive parks and fenceless properties, suburbs like Llewellyn Park, New Jersey, were connected by rail, tram or ferry to the metropolitan core. The journalists who flocked to Llewellyn Park’s opening in 1852 lavished it with hyperbolic praise, marvelling at its transformation into ‘an enchanted sound, or fairy land.’<sup>14</sup> For all the varied ecology of the early suburbs, it was *this* manifestation that took precedence in the cultural imagination, creating the foundations of an influential suburban ideal. In *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820–1939* (1990), John Stilgoe observes that suburbia occupied a frontier territory from the very beginning. Located both geographically and philosophically between city and country, and supposedly combining the advantages of both, the suburb represented a new locus of ‘democratic values and a pastoral retreat from the rush of urban culture.’<sup>15</sup> Developers played to these dualisms, promoting the suburb as the new embodiment of the agrarian ideal; a green and cultivatable space populated by like-minded pioneers. Since state lawmakers had created opportunities for local self-rule – allowing communities to establish separate municipalities with their own distinctive ethos, whilst maintaining cultural and economic ties to the city – the suburb came to be thought of as a ‘bastion against society’ and a domestic haven in which to raise the ideal family.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ernest Hemingway, blurb for European edition of John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (edition undisclosed), as qtd. by Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004), p.215.

<sup>14</sup> *The Independent*, 23 April 1865 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1865/04/23/news/llewellyn-park.html?pagewanted=all>> [Accessed 5 October 2015].

<sup>15</sup> John Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p.24.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, p.47.

Even as the concept of suburbia as Other to the city took on a durable solidity, one major metropolis challenged this binary. In 1944, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer captured the unique geography of Los Angeles in language that echoed Dos Passos' description of the urban core and anticipated James Howard Kunstler's later evocation of a more ubiquitous suburban sprawl. In no uncertain terms, Adorno and Horkheimer condemned the 'new bungalows on the outskirts [...] and their built-in demand to be discarded after a short while like empty food cans.'<sup>17</sup> Their words evoked L.A. as a homogenous, low-density wasteland, devoid of areas of cultural distinction, and endlessly self-replicating. Meanwhile, its inhabitants were not pioneering individualists but slavish adherents to the capitalist imperative to accumulate. Nevertheless, in the pre-war years, Los Angeles remained relatively unique. Although Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Federal Housing Administration in 1934 to insure mortgages, theoretically democratising home-ownership and stimulating more uniform growth, the legacy of the Great Depression and an embargo on the private use of limited raw materials during the War kept suburban development to a minimum. As the industrial cities mobilised, churning out armaments and wiping out blue-collar unemployment, the 'bourgeois utopias' that glittered on the peripheries of the urban centres remained the preserve of the very wealthy.<sup>18</sup>

It wasn't until the close of the Second World War that America was finally able to distance itself from its industrial past, channelling its renewed economic prosperity into myriad developments in new territories. The 1950s were marked by a rapid, barely controlled suburbanisation as the government sought to grow the economy and accommodate returning war veterans by subsidising numerous private housing developments. The gravitational pull of cities, which had served as the nation's political and economic nuclei during the war, diminished as the onus on production lessened, and transport innovations and a healthy market in suburban land promised space and autonomy to individuals from a far broader social stratum. After years of global conflict and material necessity, the safe, affordable and more leisure-

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<sup>17</sup> Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt, Philosophische Fragmente, 1972), pp.120-21, as trans. and qtd. by Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 2006), p.48.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 155.

orientated suburbs were marketed as a fresh slice of the American Dream, 'uninfected by the virus of history' and apparently available to all those who ventured in search of it.<sup>19</sup>

Certainly, it was a project that vastly altered the metropolitan landscape nationwide and helped to stabilise global capitalism. Whilst nations that had relied solely on government builders to satisfy demand continued to experience housing shortages, America enjoyed a suburban boom thanks to governmentally supported private developers, spearheaded by Levitt and Sons, and their utilitarian methods of construction. Implementing techniques employed in the mass-production of military housing – such as standardised construction both inside and out, the rigid control of source materials, and an efficient division of labour – William Levitt created a prototype in 1947 that transformed 'a cottage industry into a major manufacturing process.'<sup>20</sup> From Levitt's prototype, a plethora of similar large-scale projects emerged, consuming upper-class hideaways and with thousands of custom-built, space-saving houses. Between 1950 and 1970, the metropolitan population living outside central cities more than doubled, from 35 million to 76 million.<sup>21</sup>

That suburbia played a crucial role in shaping class during the post-war years cannot be over-emphasised. Whilst poor, industrial suburbs and elite, upper-class enclaves did not simply disappear during the 1950s, the proliferation of affordable housing in independent municipalities outside the city bridged the gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots.' Their economic standing bolstered by benefit increases, blue-collar workers were admitted to a growing middle class, as homeownership became more indicative of social status than career. Nevertheless, the glamour and privilege associated with pre-war suburbia did not dissipate with its sudden accessibility. Equipped with all modern appliances, such as televisions, stoves and washing machines, and catering to the pastoral ideal with their spacious lawns and light-filled front rooms, Levittown's houses satisfied the demand for both practicality and luxury, offering the promise of betterment.

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<sup>19</sup> James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), p.122.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, p.234.

<sup>21</sup> Teaford, p.31.

Whilst Levitt and Sons' identikit houses may have been constructed according to the most profitable methods, the contours of suburban development were shaped by a political drive to materialise and project the realisation of the democratic ideal. In a 1942 speech to the Loan League, Roosevelt famously employed a rhetoric of soldierly camaraderie to promote his housing reforms: 'A nation of homeowners, of people who own a real share in their land,' he declared, 'is unconquerable.'<sup>22</sup> His words tapped into a recurring theme in U.S. history: when Congressman George Mason drafted the Virginia Declaration of Rights in 1776, he had assigned every individual the inherent right to pursue and obtain 'happiness and safety' by 'acquiring and possessing property.'<sup>23</sup> The theory was that the nation would be brought together in the common, mutually respectful pursuit of individual goals: capital was tantamount to both personal and national happiness. Whilst the most polluted and densely populated cities increasingly betrayed the contradictions in this vision, the new mass suburbs – aimed squarely at the white middle class – offered a sanitised example of America's progressive, united front, one which was rapidly projected onto the global stage as an ideal to which all others could aspire. In the post-war years, the utopian symbolism that had long swirled around the exclusive pre-war suburbs solidified into a durable mythology. By 1950, William Levitt had made the cover of *Time Magazine*, accompanied by the whimsical tag-line, 'For Sale: A New Way of Life.'

During the 1950s and 60s, the suburbs grew at an unprecedented speed, with factories relocating to cheaper, more spacious sites outside the city and retailers pursuing their customers. Meanwhile, inner-city tax rates increased to compensate for the loss of high-income tax payers and corporations, encouraging further residential and office migration. For the first time, numerous suburbanites lived where they worked, or simply commuted from one suburb to the next: the city no longer held sway as the centre of financial affairs or the mouthpiece for political or

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<sup>22</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt in a speech before the United States Savings and Loan League, 1942, as qtd. by Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), p.237.

<sup>23</sup> George Mason, 'The Virginia Declaration of Rights,' 20-26 May 1776  
<[http://www.gunstonhall.org/georgemason/human\\_rights/vdr\\_first\\_draft.html](http://www.gunstonhall.org/georgemason/human_rights/vdr_first_draft.html)> [Accessed 31 August 2013].

social concerns. With their new disposable incomes and increased leisure time, the suburban middle classes proved to be a lucrative mass market primed for consumption. Televised advertising campaigns featured confident suburban women mastering the domestic sphere through their skillful use of household appliances, whilst their husbands looked forward to commuting to work in the latest automobile. The effect of reflecting and reinforcing this empowerment was staggering. In *Populuxe* (1986), Thomas Hine observes the ‘outright, thoroughly vulgar joy’ with which 1950s suburbanites wielded their newfound consumer power. Keen to generate ratings and advertising revenue, television sitcoms like *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960, dir. Peter Tewksbury) romanticised the traditional nuclear family and celebrated suburbs that looked just like the viewers’ own, thereby naturalising the idea of an inclusive middle class in a democratic America.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, not every American *was* part of this democratic process. Thanks to the Levitts’ unofficial policy of selling their houses solely to white families, not a single one of the 70,000 people that lived in the Levittowns by 1953 was black.<sup>25</sup> Nor were there any large families living under one roof; the houses were literally not built for them. Even as practices of suburban redlining relaxed and non-whites began to move beyond the urban core, an unpleasant real estate strategy known as ‘blockbusting’ emerged, in which agents enhanced the existing fear of racial otherness by duping white residents into selling their properties at a loss whenever racial minorities moved into the area. Between 1941 and 1955, William Levitt and Senator Joseph McCarthy spearheaded a powerful and widespread advertising campaign to persuade Congress and the electorate not to support public housing in certain areas by claiming that ‘undesirable persons’ – by whom they meant African- and Mexican-Americans – ‘would be eligible for public housing and would therefore become neighbors of the established residents.’<sup>26</sup> Crucially, in choosing to depict exclusively

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Knopf, 1986), p.4.

<sup>25</sup> Denying black Americans this ideal of homeownership was preceded by denying their ancestors land following the abolition of slavery, thereby preventing the newly liberated from gaining economic independence. Seen in this light, Roosevelt’s reference to ‘a nation of homeowners’ emerges as an exclusionary rhetoric of identity that situates black Americans ‘outside’ the nation and reconstructs them as the enemy to be ‘conquered.’

<sup>26</sup> William Levitt, interviewed by John Liell, *Levittown: A Study in Community Development*, (PhD Thesis: Yale University, July 1952), p.72, as qtd. by Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p.94.

white, nuclear families when portraying the suburbs, the media did not simply reflect an existing reality, it helped to reify it.

Though liberal governmental policies had directly influenced the growth of the post-war metropolis, the result had arguably exposed the limits and paradoxes of a liberal and democratic ideology. The increasing political autonomy that suburban neighbourhoods enjoyed fundamentally undermined liberal agendas – such as the Great Society programmes and civil rights legislation – and actually amplified social inequality. The millions who remained in the cities often did so at a disadvantage, affected by higher tax rates and zoning policies that restricted their movements and any potential for upward mobility. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), David Harvey reflects on the crucial role played by suburban development in altering the political landscape, directing community action towards the retention of property values and the defence of individualised identities. Whilst the clever couching of business interests in ‘the core values of human dignity and individual freedom’ initially made free-market values ‘compelling to protesting students, disenfranchised minorities, and globally minded humanitarians,’ suburbanites were particularly enchanted, ‘since the premium placed on private property literally located their personal worth and financial security in their own backyards.’<sup>27</sup> As a boom-and-bust financial model took shape, the expansion of the suburban property market became essential to stabilising and sustaining capitalism through the absorption of surplus liquidity. With liberalism increasingly in thrall to the market, gruesome gaps began to open between rich and poor.

In the following two sections, I turn to social and cultural studies, which began to question the marketed utopianism of suburban development during the 1950s and 60s. Section two ultimately finds fault with the exaggerated and over-generalised portraits of suburban conformity and capitalist exploitation advanced by Whyte and Riesman. Section three, conversely, finds that later studies recognise the mass-produced suburbs as manifestations of the growing terrain of speculative spatial growth that accompanied state rollback, but do not automatically resort to

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<sup>27</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.2.



demonising or pitying their inhabitants; instead, they situate suburbia in the context of broader political, social and economic processes.

## II. Suburban Social Studies, 1950-1963

Behind the rhetoric and media imagery that painted suburbia as a domestic, consumer utopia, a series of uneasy dichotomies were proving increasingly difficult to reconcile. As early as 1950, David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* argued that the marketed emphasis on consumerism as a medium of self-expression was in fact a tool employed to ensure conformity: on rushing to secure their sanctuaries of individualism in the suburbs, the middle classes not only discovered that their dream had been compromised by others, but also realised that their environment had been architecturally structured to minimise unpredictability and maximise growth potential. And certainly, in Levittown, every detail – from the maintenance of interiors to the presentation of laundry in the back yard – was meticulously governed, with buyers expected to concede to demands at the point of signing their contract. According to writers Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck, since developers wanted to appeal to ambitious families with steady incomes, generating effective transportation lines to the city and automobile-friendly roads took precedence over fostering community interaction.<sup>28</sup> Trapped in their identikit homes in stratified locations, yet connected as never before through television and advertising, suburbanites experienced a deeply unsettling sensation: 'isolation en-masse.'<sup>29</sup>

Riesman was by no means the only critic to question the standardised nature of the suburban dream. In 1956, novelist John Keats mounted a scathing indictment on the 'fresh-air slums around the edges of America's cities.'<sup>30</sup> In a bitter parody of the 'everyman' tactics employed by advertisers, Keats speaks directly to his reader, promising that, 'Like a man I'm going to call John Drone, you can find a box of your own [...]. You can be certain all other houses will be precisely like yours, inhabited by people whose age, income, [...] blood type are also precisely like yours.'<sup>31</sup> Far

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<sup>28</sup> Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000), p.xxiii.

<sup>29</sup> Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck, p.40.

<sup>30</sup> John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p.x.

<sup>31</sup> Keats, p.xi.

from presenting the suburbs as sensible, democratic alternatives to an inhospitable urban existence, Keats evokes them as unequivocally corrosive to the economic and social fabric of perfectly acceptable urban locations and townships, and argues that they have been ‘conceived in error, nurtured by greed’ and are liable to ‘drive mad myriads of housewives shut up in them.’<sup>32</sup> In Keats’ broad condemnation, no suburban location or inhabitant – established or prospective – is spared. Those who are not already obsessive, nihilistic conformers, eager to surround themselves with other bland, middle-class individuals, will be transformed into such by the physical monotony of their environment. In concluding that suburban ‘children will leave [...] perhaps even sooner than they should, for at once they will learn never to associate home with pleasure,’ Keats articulates a trope that would, according to Catherine Jurca, come to haunt suburban fiction and social studies for many years to come: the association of the suburban house and all its material comforts with a spiritual ‘homelessness.’<sup>33</sup>

In Keats’ parodic text, the suburb is not a verdant utopia located between the wild frontier and the teeming, cultivated city, but the place where dreams of individual agency and spiritual fulfilment are stifled by mass culture. Its inhabitants are, at best, transients attempting to outrun a false democracy that coerces them into the pursuit of empty goals, and, at worst, dehumanised cogs in a capitalist machine. Of course, the fundamental difference between Keats’ hyperbolic satire and the widely read sociological studies pioneered by Riesman and his contemporaries is that the former does not purport to have empirical evidence of the psycho-social ills suburbia has induced. In *The Split-Level Trap* (1960), a ‘statistical’ case study of one suburban community – Bergen County, New Jersey – Richard E. Gordon, Katherine K. Gordon and Max Gunther claim to have discovered the key to an apparently *ubiquitous* middle-class malaise. Invoking suburbia as a homogenised landscape that destroys the values of small-town America, they argue that the gross materialism encouraged by mass media has generated a range of physical, social and psychological woes. In the trio’s sensationalist language and logic-defying observations of ‘young husbands [...] suddenly start[ing] to vomit blood,’ Tim Foster

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<sup>32</sup> Keats, p.xi.

<sup>33</sup> Keats, p.xii; Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp.3-20.

correctly identifies a clear precursor to ‘the development of a suburban gothic as a sub-genre in popular culture.’<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, in *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman proposes that living in a commodified environment that celebrates individuals as the sum of their possessions has fostered a culture of competition based on material accumulation, and created a complex, paradoxical personality type. The ‘other-directed’ individual is one who has abandoned self-reflection in favour of defining himself and his status in relation to the goals, achievements and everyday consumer habits of others.<sup>35</sup> Riesman insists that this character – though adaptable – is neither autonomous nor truly community-spirited. Instead, he is deficient in self-knowledge and remains unable to relate to others through anything except the medium of consumption. In *The Organisation Man* (1956), William H. Whyte merely gives this personality type another name. Though he may not reside exclusively in suburbia, Whyte argues that the Organisation Man is most commonly found in, and partially created by, this environment. Incubated in the ‘dormitories’ of the mass developments, ferried to work on commuter trains with like-minded, money-motivated individuals, and shuttled around the country on job transfers, this type has lost any sense of individualism or creativity to a risk-averse, collectivist ethic. As with Riesman’s lonely crowd, any ‘belief in “belongingness” as the ultimate need of the individual’ is not driven by a ‘social ethic,’ but by an anxious desire to ‘live poised in a middle area.’<sup>36</sup> Instead of working together to solidify the existing community and establish a sense of place, Whyte implies that those who can afford it will continue to acquire goods and move forward, neglecting social hubs and their own core subjective needs. Echoing Keats, he claims that these middle-class businessmen have long-since ‘left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organisation life.’<sup>37</sup>

In 1963, the dangerous union of civic disengagement and constant regulation was approached from a different angle when Betty Friedan explored its psychological

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<sup>34</sup> Richard E. Gordon, Katherine E. Gordon, and Max Gunther, *The Split-Level Trap* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1960), p.28, as qtd. by Foster, p.12; Foster, p.12.

<sup>35</sup> David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p.vii.

<sup>36</sup> William H. Whyte, *The Organisation Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p.3.

<sup>37</sup> Whyte, p.3.

effect on the most enclosed member of the domestic sphere; the suburban housewife. *The Feminine Mystique* refers to the culturally produced vision of women as passive, nurturing figures within a patriarchal household, and makes the contentious claim that this mystique of ‘feminine fulfilment’ has become ‘the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture.’<sup>38</sup> Well educated, free to make decisions about household matters and happily ignorant about world affairs, the suburban housewife is, Friedan notes, ‘the dream image of the young American woman and the envy of women all over the world.’<sup>39</sup> And yet, stultified by vigorous marketing and physically isolated from employment and social, political and financial power, she is also increasingly infantilised. Following Friedan, Mary Beth Haralovich summarises the double bind of the suburban housewife: ‘Positioned amid the interlocking discourses of entertainment and consumer-product marketing, the married woman of suburbia is at once a highly visible, even “targeted,” social phenomenon, while at the same time being conditioned to accept a role characterised by confinement and estrangement from the world outside the home.’<sup>40</sup> In these conceptualisations, the suburban home becomes something of a paradox, divorced from the public, but neither individualised nor fully private.

However, even as Friedan underlines the repressive architectural layout of the famous ranch houses – claiming that the open-plan structure contributes to the feeling of never being alone or separate from one’s domestic duties – she recognises that the mass-produced suburbs cannot be solely responsible for generating such an idiosyncratic way of life. In fact, she notes that most of the educated women featured in her study had already determined to become full-time housewives *before* they moved to the suburbs. On arrival, many actively enhanced their domestic routines as a means of avoiding serious, social decision-making. Whilst sympathetic to the predicament of the suburban housewife, Friedan is careful to stress that the problem is not over-education combined with the stresses of domesticity. Rather, it is an inability to vocalise, or even address, ‘the problem that has no name:’ women’s dissatisfaction with their role.<sup>41</sup> According to Friedan, suburban women had become

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<sup>38</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), p.18.

<sup>39</sup> Friedan, p.18.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Beth Haralovich, ‘Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950’s Homemaker,’ *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (May 1989), pp.58-67, p.61.

<sup>41</sup> Friedan, p.15.

so enmeshed in the routines of the domestic sphere that they had lost their connection to the world beyond their walls.

Analysing the plethora of suburban criticism that materialised during the 1950s, Nicolaides and Wiese observe that, strikingly enough, ‘the white middle-class suburbanite emerged as a kind of victim, a casualty of mass society and corporate greed.’<sup>42</sup> Certainly, the narrative advanced by Keats and many of his contemporaries follows a surprisingly similar arc: white middle-class individuals flee the hostile and alienating city for all the freedom they have been promised, only to be subjected to social and spatial manipulations that leave them isolated, disenfranchised and deeply disturbed. Arguably fundamental to each text is a perceived loss of privacy, and a sense that the suburban home and the bodies inside are being exposed to surveillance and insidious marketing strategies. In the post-war suburbs, ‘privacy is clandestine,’ claims Whyte. Only ‘in doing things with other people’ is one permitted to feel that one is fulfilling oneself.<sup>43</sup> One might question precisely what Whyte’s desired privacy entails. The single-family homes to which he restricts his focus would have offered infinitely more space and freedom of movement than the cramped tenement buildings in the centre of cities such as New York, whose rooms often accommodated large extended families.<sup>44</sup> Whilst it would be a mistake to presume that individuals *never* experienced such sensations, studies that represent the suburbs as uniformly bland and rigorously managed capitalist structures merely exchange a utopian generalisation for its dystopian twin. Firstly, they refute the spatial, social and economic diversity of the suburbs, narrowing the suburban experience to an affluent subcategory of the mainstream middle class, and its structures to a standardised uniform ecology. Secondly, they fail to consider that a level of homogeneity might have *appealed* to suburbanites eager to integrate into a community. Instead, any semblance of a collectivist ethic is portrayed as inherently negative, as though interaction can only threaten the true American priority: individualism.

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<sup>42</sup> Nicolaides and Wiese, p.292.

<sup>43</sup> Whyte, p.390, as qtd. by Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p.86.

<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, as Martin Dines observes, the open-plan structure of the middle-class suburban home meant that families were not granted a great deal of solitude from one another. Martin Dines, *Gay Suburban Narratives in American and British Culture: Homecoming Queens* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.8.

Despite this dichotomy, their definition of individual agency remains as vague as the ‘Organisation’ it is pitted against. In *The Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-War America* (2000), Timothy Melley contends that the concept of agency is most effectively preserved by invoking it as threatened, a paradox that risks encouraging a possessive and potentially violent individualism. For him, ‘the importance of agency panic lies in the way it attempts to conserve a long-standing model of personhood – a view of the individual as a rational, motivated agent with a protected interior core of beliefs, desires, and memories.’<sup>45</sup> Although this notion of the heroically self-reliant individual – derived from the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke – had been celebrated in American culture for years, Melley argues that promoting it whilst describing it as dwindling was partially responsible for *generating* suburban imaginaries of regressive ‘masculinist outbursts of “regeneration through violence.”’<sup>46</sup> By repeatedly conjuring the white middle-class suburbanite as the principal target of these apparently malign and autonomous organisations and techno-social structures, I would argue that these social studies and parodic representations went some way towards valorising an exclusionary, alienated culture of possessive individualism.<sup>47</sup> By the end of the 1950s, the televised imagery of middle-class suburban families revelling in optimism, order and individual and collective progress, had been all-but erased by another dominant – and far more durable – paradigm.

### III. A New Breed of Social Scientist, 1960-1970

For numerous literary critics – against whose work I pit my own – this era of sensationalist social study represents the genesis of a dystopian aesthetic that continues to exert an influence on novelists to this day. Most notable of these is Catherine Jurca, whose 2001 book *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* argues that ‘the preponderance of popular novels that borrow from and mimic sociology suggests the power of the assumption that the post-war suburb was producing a new kind of American, and that novelists felt

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<sup>45</sup> Timothy Melley, *The Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-War America* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), p.14.

<sup>46</sup> Melley, p.14.

<sup>47</sup> I explore this notion in more detail in Part One of the following chapter.

themselves to be actively participating in its construction and elaboration.’<sup>48</sup> Yet such sociological hyperbole was in fact relatively short lived. By the early 1960s, a new generation of social scientists had begun to scrutinise the established critical approach.

Perhaps the most significant challenge to the rhetoric of early suburban social studies came from Bennett Berger who, in 1961, rightly argued that due to the plethora of ‘visible symbols,’ suburbia had long-since transcended its ecological status to take root as a full-blown myth.<sup>49</sup> Rife in magazines and social studies was an increasingly standardised image of the suburbs as bland, tract developments, populated by bored, over-educated wives and anxious, status-driven husbands, whose collective homogeneity fostered hyperactive socialising and a problematic emphasis on conformity. Although Berger does not refute the validity of suburban sociological studies altogether, he suggests that reports on suburban experience have been so selective as to serve an almost-polemical purpose. Where the word ‘suburban’ had once encapsulated the liberal and democratic promise of the American Dream, it now supplanted the ‘embarrassingly obsolete “bourgeois” as a packaged rebuke of the whole tenor of American life.’<sup>50</sup> Critics addressing suburbia were thus doing little to upset the status quo. Instead, they were merely exchanging a potentially radical political and economic critique for an unspecific cultural one that ‘threatens no entrenched interest, and contains no direct implications for agitation or concerned action.’<sup>51</sup>

Berger’s stance on suburbia as a scapegoat for national concerns finds an unlikely ally in Riesman’s ‘The Suburban Dislocation,’ an essay published in 1964, fourteen years after *The Lonely Crowd*. Implicitly revising his own position, Riesman acknowledges that middle-class scholars are liable to burden suburbia with their fears about the erosion of freedom and autonomy in a nation beset by Cold War paranoia and shaped by mass, bureaucratised development.<sup>52</sup> However, whilst

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<sup>48</sup> Jurca, p.136.

<sup>49</sup> Bennett M Berger, ‘The Myth of Suburbia,’ *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Winter 1961), pp.38-49, p.38.

<sup>50</sup> Berger, p.38.

<sup>51</sup> Berger, p.38.

<sup>52</sup> See David Riesman, ‘The Suburban Dislocation,’ *Abundance for What? And Other Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), pp.226-257, p.227. For a fictional example of this tendency, see *Invasion of*

Riesman remains conveniently ambivalent about the extent of a suburban affect, Berger offers a new method for conceptualising the suburb. By differentiating between ‘the suburbs’ as an ecological term denoting a range of (non-uniform) landscapes and ‘suburbia’ as a cultural construction, Berger not only exposes the extent to which universalised myths and metaphors have obscured suburbia’s diverse material reality, but also advocates a more multifaceted critical approach to suburbia as both a physical terrain and a culturally produced, and therefore contestable, narrative.

In the preface to his 1963 book *Class in Suburbia*, William Dobriner elaborates upon Berger’s work by identifying the rigid conceptual oppositions between city and suburb as a primary component of this persistent suburban folklore. On traversing ‘the magic frontier separating city from suburb,’ he observes, ‘city dwellers are transformed from working class to middle class; Democrats to Republicans.’ Meanwhile, ‘neighbourhood informality is maximal and life in general, it seems, is one frenetic garden party.’<sup>53</sup> By interrogating this binary opposition from a social and ecological point of view, Dobriner explores whether there is sufficient evidence of a ‘distinctive, nonurban, semirural way of life’ to justify a sociological concept of ‘the suburbs.’<sup>54</sup> What he discovers is that the suburbs often share numerous social, economic and cultural characteristics – such as a white middle-class majority and a commuting workforce – with small cities, thus problematising the binary relationship between them.

The problem, Dobriner surmises, is that analysts and critics all too frequently compare the suburbs to their urban counterparts and, finding them *relatively* less heterogeneous in terms of class, race and population, dismiss them as crushingly homogenous in all respects. In response, Dobriner seeks to exchange the ‘single, hypothetical suburb’ of earlier sociological writing for a more nuanced analysis of

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*the Body Snatchers* (1956, dir. Don Siegal). Suburban California serves as the setting for this film, in which the town’s inhabitants are gradually replaced by alien duplicates that are identical but for a barely perceptible lack of human emotion. Unlike Keats’ text, the film does not advance a specific anti-suburbanism so much as use the uniform housing of the 1950s tracts as a fitting visual metaphor and embodiment of more fundamental concerns about a national ‘epidemic.’

<sup>53</sup> William M. Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia* (Englewood: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p.ix.

<sup>54</sup> Dobriner, p.ix.



the age and characteristics of specific suburban sites.<sup>55</sup> His work was the first to conduct an in-depth analysis of the fundamental social, cultural and political differences between mass developments, like Levittown, which were occupied by new, middle-class communities, and established small towns of varying social and economic background, which had been incorporated into the metropolitan ecology and transformed into ‘reluctant suburbs.’<sup>56</sup> His findings led him to conclude that individual suburbs are so variegated that referring to them as homogenised is exceptionally reductive. Moreover, any coherence of ‘lifestyle, behaviour and social structure’ between certain suburbs is less likely to be a result of the ‘ecological position of suburbs within the metropolitan area’ than a ‘manifestation of social class.’<sup>57</sup>

Although Dobriner contends that there are sufficient ‘demographic, ecological, class and institutional’ differences between the suburb and the more heterogeneous urban core to merit a structural distinction between the two, he observes that ‘the line between suburb and city is almost always a thin political boundary more visible on a map than to the eye.’<sup>58</sup> Of course, in 1963, when there was ‘no suburban equivalent to Wall Street or Broadway’ and no counterpart to inner-city populations of racial and ethnic minorities, such cartographic boundaries would have been infinitely more discernible than they are today. Nevertheless, these maps offer nothing in the way of a deeper understanding of the cultures, histories and experiences that exist within their borders. Dobriner argues that the issue must not be thought of as “either/or” suburb or city with nothing in between: these concepts are only gross and primitive expressions of a complicated social reality.’<sup>59</sup> Instead, he offers a way of thinking of suburbia as amorphous and evolving, both mappable and experienced.

In 1967, Herbert Gans took just such an approach in his rigorous and ground-breaking case study of ‘a single new suburb,’ and the coming into being of its new

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<sup>55</sup> Dobriner, p.13.

<sup>56</sup> Dobriner, p.12.

<sup>57</sup> Dobriner, p.ix.

<sup>58</sup> Dobriner, p.23. For example, suburbanites generally had a longer commute to work than city dwellers, and a larger proportion owned their own home.

<sup>59</sup> Dobriner, p.24.

community.<sup>60</sup> This was not just any development, however, but the newest of the symbolically freighted Levittowns. When researching *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (1967), Gans attempted to engage with the New Jersey suburb as both an objective observer and an active participant, conducting statistical research and taking part in community decision-making as an occupant of a Levittown house. His aim, in doing so, was to complicate the idea of mass suburbia as a finished environment that may or may not arouse an emotional response, and evoke it instead as fluid and subject to change, affected by the choices, desires and morals that the community brings with it, and shaped by its ongoing decisions. Of course, Levittown was not without its specific social and structural problems. ‘Insufficient public transportation, less than perfect provision of public services, inadequate decision-making and feedback processes, lack of representation for minorities and overrepresentation for the builder,’ and a degree of class and generational conflict, were just some of the issues that needed to be addressed as it built its infrastructure.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, in reconceptualising suburban place-making as an ongoing process, Gans exposes as fallacy any sense that suburban space generates a uniformly negative experience. Instead, Levittown is merely an ‘old community on new land, culturally not significantly different from suburban subdivisions and urban neighbourhoods inhabited by the same kinds of people, and politically much like other small American towns.’<sup>62</sup>

Particularly striking about Gans’ study is the skilful way in which he uses his reappraisal of Levittown to question the very concept of mass society. Early in the text, Gans makes implicit connections between the local and the national when he observes the pervasiveness of the theory that ‘many features of American Society, whether television programmes, Levittowns, or Pentagon policies – are imposed by an intentional or unintentional conspiracy of business and governmental leaders acting on passive or resigned Americans who actually want something entirely different.’<sup>63</sup> What his study revealed is that Levittown’s builders, and governmental and financial backers, represented only small facets in Levittown’s ongoing

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<sup>60</sup> Herbert Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.v.

<sup>61</sup> Gans, p.413.

<sup>62</sup> Gans, pp.408-9.

<sup>63</sup> Gans, p.xix.

development, each only maintaining their influence ‘by attracting people and responding to their demands.’ Ultimately, a community’s development is ‘almost always a reflection of the people who live in it, especially the numerical and cultural majority.’<sup>64</sup> Since Levittown’s inhabitants were not a homogenous mass, but a mosaic of individuals with different attachments and ideologies, simply demanding conformity to new ideas would not effect change. Therefore, instead of seeking a single compromise to the needs and desires of different groups, Gans encouraged the suburban community, its local government and surrounding municipalities to work together to ‘experiment with new solutions for dissatisfied groups and cultures in the total population. This means a diversity of housing, living arrangement, and institutions, either within the same community or in separate ones, keyed to the diversity of background, culture and aspirations relevant to community life.’<sup>65</sup>

By evoking the specificities of individual experience within the community, at the same time as addressing the dynamic between communities, Gans goes some way towards establishing a portrait of the nation as a series of interlinking and mutually dependent regions. It is an oscillation between the micro and macro, local and regional, that, I shall argue in sections five and six, is evident in the fictions and films addressed throughout this project, which not only invoke the perils of envisioning community as absolute and territorially bounded, but also stress the importance of reimagining citizenship as flexible and inclusive. In his concluding chapter, ‘Levittown and America,’ Gans cautions both the planners and the young middle-class inhabitants of Levittown – and, by extension, other autonomous municipalities – to recognise themselves as a fundamental part of the fabric of national society. Whilst careful to stress the class diversity of American suburbia in general, Gans argues that, as ‘the principal market for the consumer goods [and...] political appeals,’ the middle class residing in Levittown and other similar developments wield a significant socio-political power on the national stage.<sup>66</sup>

In practice, however, the relative independence, security, affluence, and priorities – including family, homemaking and social life – of such communities also meant that

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<sup>64</sup> Gans, p.411.

<sup>65</sup> Gans, p.vii.

<sup>66</sup> Gans, p.vii.

many were disinclined to support broader social or governmental change, and often saw themselves as existing in direct opposition to it. Since suburban municipalities like Levittown had their own local government, taxes, schools and commercial services, its inhabitants were prone to seeing the national government as parasitic and public services as pointless expenses. At the same time, the local administration's failure to 'tailor its actions to the community's diversity' through its privileging of white home-owners, enhanced a fear of pluralism.<sup>67</sup> With the home-owning middle class growing, and autonomous suburban municipalities becoming more prevalent, Levittown was arguably something of a worrying template for a burgeoning culture of private interest.

What the nuanced, but frequently neglected, studies by Dobriner, Berger and Gans demonstrate is that the relationship between built environment and social change is never as unequivocal as cause and effect. In *The Production of Space* (1991), Henri Lefebvre contends that space, 'in addition to being a means of production, [is...] also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.'<sup>68</sup> In other words, physical spaces exist in an ongoing, dialectical relationship with those that inhabit them. Gans' study prefigures both Michel Foucault's and Henri Lefebvre's conceptualisation of space by interrogating the origins of the changes people reported after coming to Levittown, and concluding that these changes are not unidirectional, and those reporting them are never simply 'apathetic conformists ripe for takeover.'<sup>69</sup> In his view, suburban autonomy has both its obvious benefits and its pitfalls. On one hand, suburbs like Levittown could be considered tremendously appealing, offering space and freedom to a broad range of individuals. On the other, the constant valorisation of white homogeneity and capital – at the expense of diverse community interaction – appeared to be taking root in the suburban political consciousness, fuelling further practices of segregation. Suburban development might have been *incited* by a drive for profit and a political desire to materialise and project a progressive ideology, but its shape was increasingly being *moulded* by suburbanites themselves.

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<sup>67</sup> Gans, p.vii.

<sup>68</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Blackwell, 1991), p.26.

<sup>69</sup> Gans, p.xx.

During the 1970s and 80s, the profusion of immigration, the intensification of civil rights movements, processes of deindustrialisation, the aging of the baby boomers and changes to ‘traditional’ family structures all contributed to the growth and diversification of the suburbs.<sup>70</sup> Retirement havens, predominantly gay communities and neighbourhoods with two-income families all found a place in the suburbs and drove changing consumer demands. Free from what Jon C. Teaforde calls the ‘homogenising tyranny of a single metropolitan authority’ suburbia offered ‘a broad range of people the option of being different, of joining with like-minded devotees of alternative life-styles.’<sup>71</sup>

It was during this time that America’s entire economic infrastructure began to shift. In 1971, Nixon untethered the dollar from its gold equivalent, thereby virtually undoing the Bretton Woods monetary agreement, and by 1973, the U.S. had entered a marketplace of global exchange.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, as the legacy of the Vietnam War and the Watergate Scandal fostered a new public suspicion towards the government, drawing attention to the ‘credibility gap’ between the ‘official’ story and the reality, deregulation and privatisation became ever more widespread.<sup>73</sup> When Reagan was elected in 1980, the embrace of free-market ideologies became unequivocal.<sup>74</sup> Gans’ warnings were more pertinent than ever: even as upwardly mobile foreign-born residents began to move to the suburbs in greater numbers – forming a 52% majority by the year 2000<sup>75</sup> – white flight continued, with the most affluent moving ever further from the urban core, propelled by the desire for space and the frequently self-fulfilling notion that the disenfranchised would be left behind in the inner-ring suburbs. Although, in the general arc of suburban development, the 70s and 80s experienced a radical diversification, it remained a heavily segregated one.

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<sup>70</sup> By the time of the 2000 census, married couples with children constituted only 27% of suburban households. Census details qtd. by Brooks, p.5.

<sup>71</sup> Teaforde, p.71.

<sup>72</sup> See Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, ‘Four Phases of Neoliberalism: An Introduction,’ *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. by Huehls and Greenwald Smith, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), pp.1-20, for more information.

<sup>73</sup> See Stephen Paul Miller, *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p.5 for more information.

<sup>74</sup> Reagan was elected in 1980 and was inaugurated as POTUS in 1981.

<sup>75</sup> Nicolaides and Wiese, p.410.

In the following section, I excavate the ideological foundations of the gated community – a spatial form that became immensely popular during the 1990s – and its New Urbanist counterpart, and I argue that certain anti-sprawl campaigners have inadvertently valorised the rise of these privatised spaces by championing the fortification of (largely obsolete) boundaries between cities and small-towns. I do so with the dual aim of highlighting the dangers of an ongoing fetishisation of the frontier and emphasising the perils of embracing purely architectural solutions to the problems of sprawl.

#### **IV. Suburbia's Fate: Sprawl, New Urbanism, Gated Communities, 1990-Present**

Whilst the term 'suburbia' remained in general usage as a 'broad catch-all descriptor for the vast landscape of low density, broadly residential enclaves on the outskirts of the nation's cities,' any attempt to define it as a distinct topographical environment was increasingly fraught.<sup>76</sup> By the late 1980s, the infamous, white middle-class subdivisions had been virtually engulfed by a vast polycentric sprawl, and many of the regions on the outskirts of the nation's cities not only had complete political autonomy but were also frequently economically superior to the hubs from which they grew. The multinucleated city of Los Angeles, once considered the exception to metropolitan growth, increasingly represented its template. This era was marked by the emergence of an entirely new idiom to describe the landscapes on the peripheries of the nation's cities and the inception of a fierce and ongoing debate about the nature of the American landscape as a whole.

In general, geographers attempting to classify the changing metropolitan form during the late 1980s and early 1990s took one of two approaches, either perpetuating urban/suburban dichotomies by defining increasingly varied peripheral areas in relation to a metropolitan core – employing terms such as inner-ring suburbs and mature suburbs – or taking a fundamentally 'decentralised' approach. In 1991, Joel Garreau somewhat confused this distinction by proposing that the peripheries had been transformed into Edge Cities that functioned as the new 'core' of consumer life and devoured old suburban communities. Whilst appearing to refute the idea of the

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<sup>76</sup> Teaford, p.43.

old urban core as the ‘shared heart of the metropolitan area,’ Garreau continued to insist on the idea of a centrifugal force, reversing the dependency between periphery and urban core, but still essentially viewing the *new* urban landscape from an imagined ‘real’ city of old.<sup>77</sup>

For numerous others, however, the metropolitan future represented multiple centres of growth and decline in a directionless and poorly controlled sprawl that reached from coast to coast. The word sprawl had first entered the realm of statistical analysis and become a quantifiable phenomenon in 1974, when the Real Estate Research Corporation authored ‘The Costs of Sprawl,’ a study which attempted to measure the financial cost of increasingly prevalent, low-density, broadly residential, automobile-dependent developments that often leapfrogged over vacant land.<sup>78</sup> The conclusion was damning: sprawl was economically and environmentally more expensive than any other form of residential development, consumed the greatest portion of natural resources and placed the biggest strain on public infrastructure expenditure due to the demand for new connective highways and longer water lines. By the close of the twentieth century, a war on sprawl had been declared. Essayists condemned the nature of this unrestricted growth, lamented the loss of farmland and the strain on public infrastructure expenditure, blamed the rise in obesity on car dependency and criticised developers and consumers alike for instituting ‘a pattern of residential apartheid.’<sup>79</sup>

In *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (1987), Robert Fishman evokes the long-standing imagery associated with suburbia by delineating its space primarily by what it excludes; racial diversity, commerce, industry and the lower-classes. Implicit to his rhetorical domestication of the suburban landscape is the notion that a ‘suburb is *only* a suburb when it is white and middle or upper class.’<sup>80</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the ongoing dissolution of neat binary categorisations of suburb and city, and the rise of sprawling ‘multicentred regions defined by

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<sup>77</sup> Teaford, p.152, discussing Garreau.

<sup>78</sup> See Real Estate Research Corporation, ‘The Costs of Sprawl,’ *Portland Regional Planning History*, Vol. 26 (1974) <[http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/oscdl\\_planning/26](http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/oscdl_planning/26)> [Accessed 8 September 2017].

<sup>79</sup> See Robert D. Bullard, J. Eugene Grigsby, Charles Lee and Joe R. Feagin, *Residential Apartheid: The American Legacy* (Los Angeles: CAAS Publications, 1994).

<sup>80</sup> Nicolaides and Wiese, p.7.

superhighways' leads Fishman to herald that 'the history of suburbia [is coming] to an end.'<sup>81</sup> With one phrase, Fishman semantically erases place identity for all those who might still consider themselves to be suburbanites.

Fishman is not the only theorist to do so. In *Cities Without Suburbs* (1993), New Regionalist David Rusk claims that racial segregation and the emergence of an urban underclass are rife in cities that have maintained rigid, obsolete boundaries between centre and suburb in an age of sprawl. In contrast, cities that have been permitted to expand – exhibiting what he terms 'elastic' tendencies – have experienced more even-handed, favourable 'social and economic results than those in which annexation is limited.'<sup>82</sup> By encouraging Americans to forge more unified coalitions to consider larger regional needs, Rusk feels that formal consolidation might one day be possible. The 'real city,' he declares, 'is the total metropolitan area – city and suburb,' and the county government should therefore be endowed with all the municipal power to act as 'de facto metro government.'<sup>83</sup> However, whilst appearing to echo Gans' positive appeal for a more collaborative approach to ongoing development, Rusk's proposal has several flaws. Firstly, he fails to address the fact that merger schemes are frequently motivated more by economic interests than social ones, employed to enhance a region's reputation through commercial – not residential – development. Secondly, new regionalist proposals are reliant on the idea that the city remains the universally agreed-upon heart of the metropolis. Far from embracing the changing suburban landscape, Rusk betrays a desire to tame and ultimately erase it from view, lest it swallow the city's social, cultural and political identity whole, replacing it with a series of homogenised shopping malls, freeways and insatiable consumers.

What an analysis of much of the rhetoric surrounding the concept of sprawl reveals is an implicit class and racial bias that laments the dissolution of the imagined binary relationship between city, suburb and country, and attempts to enact a retreat to what

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<sup>81</sup> See Fishman, p.17. See also Leigh Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs: Where the American Dream is Moving* (London: Penguin, 2013).

<sup>82</sup> 'Measuring Happenstance: David Rusk's City Elasticity Hypothesis,' *Demographia* <<http://www.demographia.com/db-rusk.htm>> [Accessed 10 October 2013], paraphrasing David Rusk, *Cities Without Suburbs* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995).

<sup>83</sup> Rusk, p.7, as qtd. by Teaford, p.141; Rusk, p.121-2, as qtd. by Teaford, p.142.



Robert Bruegmann calls ‘class-based assumptions about what makes a good urban life’ without analysing the average experience across the changing metropolis.<sup>84</sup> For urban theorists such as James Howard Kunstler, for example, sprawl is not merely a geographical phenomenon, it is a moral concern. In 1968, Marshall McLuhan had predicted the emergence of a ‘global village’ peopled by individuals with a collective, ‘tribal’ identity by the end of the century.<sup>85</sup> His term appeared to conceptualise contemporary society as democratic and pluralist; a place where local values were honoured rather than conflated. Yet McLuhan’s collective was not predicated upon the ‘deep, horizontal fraternity’ of Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ so much as on the dissolution of place identity in a hyper-connected world, and on the streamlining of consumer habits within the private sphere.<sup>86</sup> For James Howard Kunstler, the suburban sprawl of the late twentieth century heralds precisely this dissolution of authentic civil life. In *The Geography of Nowhere* (1994), Kunstler argues that the greatest cost of a ‘commercialised individualism’ that does ‘away with the public realm’ is ‘the sacrifice of a sense of place: the idea that people and things exist in some sort of continuity, that we belong to the world physically and chronologically.’<sup>87</sup> Where the sheer size of America had once ‘acted as a political safety valve and enabled the country’s inhabitants to discover frontiers on a regular basis,’ the fetishised individualism promoted by America’s mantra of progress was proving geographically and ideologically unsustainable.<sup>88</sup> In Kunstler’s bleak vision of an unmoored, amoral no-place, the very idea of the American nation – and of its place in a globalised system – has been thrown into question.

By suggesting that a sense of independence and belonging can only exist through a relationship *with* society and the public realm rather than in a withdrawal from it, Kunstler arguably mounts a valuable counter-narrative to earlier conceptualisations of individualism as the antithesis of a collectivist ethic. And yet, it is not entirely clear what golden age of collectivism he is mourning the passing of. In fact, his book

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<sup>84</sup> Robert Bruegmann, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp.8-9.

<sup>85</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2001), p.3.

<sup>86</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.6.

<sup>87</sup> Kunstler, p.273; p.118.

<sup>88</sup> Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p.x.

does not suggest that modern alienation can be countered through a specific, personal relationship with the social, but rather clings to a nostalgic image of the American small-town of the nineteenth century as a store-house for both community spirit and national identity. In levelling the full force of his criticism at the 'subdivisions and strip malls intended for middle- and lower-middle-class families,' without reference to what Bruegmann refers to as 'architecture or landscapes acceptable to upper-middle-class taste, no matter how scattered or low in density,' Kunstler betrays the same implicit class bias as Fishman and Rusk, and hints at prioritising aesthetics over democratic potential.<sup>89</sup> In reality, the intensely complex phenomenon of sprawl at least partly reflects an increasing social mobility and the exercise of personal choice for a growing population newly empowered to contribute to the changed landscape.

The 1990s housing-boom that saw the inhabitants of gated communities and 'privatopias' – with shared facilities, strict communal regulations and private taxes – rise from one to six million in less than a decade indicated a turning-point in American sensibilities.<sup>90</sup> The surge appeared to be a testament to the growing desire for stability, permanence, and spatial boundaries in a nation that prided itself on its ability to surmount them. Evolving from suburban design and development practices, and marketed as safer, smaller, amenity-rich alternatives to their urban counterparts, the gated community was imagined as a 'special kind of suburb,' one that retained its original promise.<sup>91</sup> Yet such isolated pockets were not designed to contain community spirit so much as exclude the less desirable aspects of modern society through the rigid control of residential space. Playing the role once occupied by the state, wealthy developers frequently bought properties in the blighted inner-ring suburbs only to tear them down and construct large, ostentatious gated enclaves that heightened tensions between new and existing residents. Employing a 'fortress' mentality, these 'ghettoes of affluence' promoted the concept of exclusivity and played on the anxieties of 'external' threats.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, even as the high crime rates of

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<sup>89</sup> Bruegmann, p.151.

<sup>90</sup> David Harvey, Lecture given on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2000, published as *Megacities Lecture 4: Possible Urban Worlds* (Amersfoot: Twynstra Gudde Management Consultants, 2000), pp.1-124, p.56.

<sup>91</sup> Setha Low, *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p.50.

<sup>92</sup> Harvey, *Megacities Lecture 4: Possible Urban Worlds*, p.56.

the mid 1990s fell, the number of residents occupying such communities continued to grow. Together with this boom was an increasingly discernible trend towards local self-rule. According to the 2002 Census of Governments, there were 19,429 municipal governments in the United States.<sup>93</sup> Whilst this fragmentation might appear to mark the victory of diversity and local community over dogmatic political paradigms, the liberation from larger regional, state or national priorities often enhanced social inequality, with a number of municipalities using their regulatory powers to exercise bias and ‘attract and retain residential and commercial wealth to the detriment of their neighbours.’<sup>94</sup>

Amid the growing dissatisfaction, movements emerged that claimed to hold the key to integrating modern America’s dialectical inconsistencies into a cohesive and *liveable* whole. Early efforts focussed on what became known as Smart Growth, which worked to direct inevitable growth in a thoughtful manner, with an emphasis on densification within fixed boundaries. The most successful of these, New Urbanism – a neo-traditional design movement centred largely on communities built *from the ground up* – vowed to ‘restore the original promise of suburban life’ and ‘revive the lost art of place-making.’<sup>95</sup> At the core of its founders’ manifesto was the notion that Americans were victims of their built environment, with its hazardous, automobile-orientated roads, soulless, repetitive hypermarkets and drive-in schools. In the unambiguously titled *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (2000), Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck posit that ‘we live today in cities and suburbs whose form and character we did not choose. They were imposed upon us, by federal policy, local zoning laws, and the demands of the automobile.’<sup>96</sup> By reordering the American landscape into the form of self-contained, traversable villages replete with community spaces and a range of

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<sup>93</sup> Teaford, p.126. Teaford argues that political fragmentation has become the very essence of American suburbia: ‘Unlike in Britain, where the term suburb refers to a peripheral area whether inside or beyond a major city’s boundaries, in the U.S. the federal census bureau and most commentators have defined suburbia as that zone within metropolitan areas but beyond central city limits.’ p.ix. He goes so far as to contend that ‘by definition, American suburbs are those areas that have eschewed union with a larger hub and opted for a measure of autonomy. Governmental disorder and discord are basic to American suburban life.’ Teaford, p.123.

<sup>94</sup> Teaford, p.124.

<sup>95</sup> *New Urbanism: Creating Liveable Sustainable Communities* <<http://www.newurbanism.org>> [Accessed 11 August 2013].

<sup>96</sup> Duany and others, p.xiii.

affordable housing, the New Urbanists claimed it was possible to reunite the pioneering ethos of eighteenth-century individualists with the community spirit of post-war ‘neighbourhoods before they were ravaged by sprawl.’<sup>97</sup> Their first major project – Seaside, Florida – featured rustic, nineteenth-century-style housing alongside modern community centres and broad, tree-lined streets. Although promoted as a town steeped in tradition, Seaside’s reality was more accurately a pre-packaged nostalgia from a collective past that never truly existed.

In the 1998 film *The Truman Show* (dir. Peter Weir) – filmed in Seaside – the protagonist discovers that the only life he has ever known is a choreographed, TV-show myth; his environment has been artificially structured to reduce his sense of adventure, dispel his neighbourly curiosity and confuse his real memories with those bestowed upon him by reductive advertisements. Those who do not play their dictated role – the poor, the homeless – are simply evicted. Weir’s vision is not entirely fantastical. New Urbanism’s practitioners had rightly claimed that ‘the American Dream just [didn’t] seem to be coming true at the dawn of the millennium.’<sup>98</sup> Yet they failed to acknowledge that the American Dream had only *ever* existed as a contradictory discourse whose irreconcilable fissures had been exposed by suburban development. Instead of navigating the dialectical inconsistencies in suburbia’s historical legacy, the New Urbanists negotiated nostalgia through set-design, and marketed it to the wealthy as the ‘tradition’ crucial to community and place-making. ‘How about your hometown on Main Street?’ they ask in their book *Suburban Nation*, invoking a shared childhood idyll, now long-subsumed by sprawl, before promising to trigger this collective memory through their building practises.<sup>99</sup> The very real effects of creating communities unamenable to change were often devastating; in areas where the urban growth boundary was restricted, land prices soared, and the rental market soured. With an over-abundance of apartments on the market ‘vacancy rates were at near-record levels.’<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Duany and others, p.xxiv.

<sup>98</sup> Duany and others, p.xxii.

<sup>99</sup> Duany and others, p.xi.

<sup>100</sup> Randal O’Toole, *Portland’s Smart-Growth Example* <<http://www.ti.org/portlandoped.html>> [Accessed 20 December 2017].

Ultimately, whilst it is worth stressing the enormous potential benefits of densification strategies within fixed boundaries – whereby racially and socially diverse housing developments are built into existing neighbourhoods, ideally diluting the potency of single-issue lobbying groups – it is vital to acknowledge ‘sprawl’ as both an objective reality and a cultural concept that has amassed a series of assumptions around it, not all of which are accurate. Throughout this project, I stress that sprawl is never simply a product of failed state intervention or an embodiment of abstract capitalist imperatives, and the imagery most commonly associated with it – one identikit community after another stretching on indefinitely – does not do justice to its complexity and variety. Further, although it is not my intention to propose solutions to the problems associated with ongoing suburbanisation, it is worth noting that for those seeking to do so, it is not simply a matter of choosing between the market or the state, large-scale urban transformation and local, grassroots change. Though I have already criticised New Urbanism’s essentially private endeavours, I do not come down unequivocally on the side of state intervention. The catastrophic decline and eventual demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects in St Louis arguably stands as a valuable counterpoint to overly simplistic laments about the dissolution of modernist top-down change and public-policy planning.

More importantly, sprawl must not be semantically or theoretically isolated from cultural concepts of urban, suburban and rural spaces, or assumed simply to be a manifestation of the mass-produced suburbs writ large. Though this project will not fall into David Rusk’s trap of embracing conventional hierarchies or implying that the urban core is the shared heart of social experience, it *will* stage an oscillation between social, cultural and political concepts of city and suburb, local and global. In doing so, it aims to avoid defining a rigid socio-spatial model for a new American ‘centre’ or embracing metropolitan development as a process of absolute decentralisation towards aesthetic and cultural incoherence.

Following Bruegmann, I recognise urban development as ‘a mix of forces tending toward centralisation along with forces tending toward dispersal.’<sup>101</sup> As this project’s final chapter will highlight, recent manifestations of low-density, badly regulated sprawl on the outskirts of cities such as Detroit might be seen as both cause and effect of predominantly white gentrification taking place in their city centres, which pushes poorer communities of colour to the once-exclusive suburbs. At the same time, the affluent are attracted to depressed prices in the city centres, their presence often encouraging bouts of creative destruction, whereby inner-city neighbourhoods are levelled to make way for denser, but more exclusive, alternatives. As such, inner-city gentrification and peripheral sprawl are, at least partially, connected. Furthermore, the fact that parts of central Detroit and New York have less manufacturing activity and a lower population density than the rapidly densifying suburbs beyond throws into question *what*, precisely, sprawl is, and *where* it can be said to exist. Meanwhile, Los Angeles, often considered the epitome of sprawl, is now America’s most densely populated urban area. Arguably, we need a new way of looking.

It is my contention that the recent literature and film discussed in this project understand and stage this oscillation between once-sacred cultural polarities, recognising that ‘it is necessary to look constantly back and forth from edge to the centre, from the most specific to the most general, and from the individual to the neighbourhood to the urban system as a whole’ in order to understand America’s complex geographies.<sup>102</sup> Further, they recognise sprawl as both a spatial and a socio-cultural concept, conceived and shaped by nostalgia and neoliberal innovation, collective efforts and basic individual decisions, hope and cynicism, local and regional interests, technological shifts, social patterns and unintended consequences. Evoking the fluid, interdependent relationship between localised socio-political and spatial tactics and (inter)national change, Richard S. Weinstein argues that ‘the culture of unlimited choice and unconstrained growth, movement and inflated freedoms now faces the prospect of being radically altered by the restructuring of the

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<sup>101</sup> Bruegmann, p.70. Processes tending towards centralisation include business consolidation – whereby individual towns no longer have their own banking systems and independent retailers. On the flip side, the spread of fundraising channels has facilitated the emergence of diverse political interest groups and diluted the concentration of power in Washington.

<sup>102</sup> Bruegmann, p.95.

national and international economy, the migrations of people from less developed nations, population growth and environmental limits.<sup>103</sup> Once considered 'privileged sites of geographical feeling [...] the scale of familiarity, loyalty and authentic experience, in contrast with the merely imagined community of the nation and the passionless economic space of globalisation,' insular communities are being imaginatively transformed into sites of socio-cultural exchange.<sup>104</sup>

## V. Revisionist Readings of Suburban Fictions, 1961 and 1985

One of the first full-length studies of suburban fiction, Jurca's *White Diaspora* offers an outline of the 'genre's' development from the early twentieth century to the modern day. Partially rejecting the stereotype that the suburbs have nothing to offer, Jurca argues that writers who have set their work here have in fact tended to 'disavow its very real privileges' in favour of 'promoting a fantasy of victimisation that reinvents white flight as the persecution of those who flee [and] turns material advantages into artefacts of spiritual and cultural oppression.'<sup>105</sup> Drawing a similar conclusion, Robert Beuka's *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century Fiction and Film* (2004) contends that post-war fiction has generally portrayed suburbia 'less as a lived place than as a signifier of certain co-optive, even totalitarian, impulses that lurk beneath the fabric of centrist, middle-class American culture.'<sup>106</sup> Both writers, then, endeavour to expose a problematic tendency to reduce a complex and varied material environment to little more than a metaphor for and an exemplum of tensions inherent within American culture. As Vermeulen rightly notes, to them, the suburban story embodies nothing so much as a 'parable of the American Dream [and] a study of human frailties.'<sup>107</sup>

In fact, far from inspiring a dystopian aesthetic, early reductive notions about suburbia appear instead to have lingered in the minds of leading literary critics. Indeed, it is they who fail repeatedly to view cultural representations through

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<sup>103</sup> Richard S. Weinstein, 'The First American City,' *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Edward W. Soja and Allen J. Scott (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp.22-46, p.41.

<sup>104</sup> Hsu, Hsuan L., 'Literature and Regional Production,' *American Literary History*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 2005), pp.36-69, p.64.

<sup>105</sup> Jurca, p.9.

<sup>106</sup> Beuka, p.14.

<sup>107</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen, *Scenes from the Suburbs: The Suburb in Contemporary US Film and Television* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.6.

anything other than the distorting lens of early social studies. In a brief analysis of Yates' *Revolutionary Road* – a novel that both Jurca and Beuka reference as an exemplary suburban fiction – I argue that the suburban novel might be defined as such by its *self-conscious* engagement with the assumptions of the category and its *problematization* of established tropes of suburban place identification. Thus, whilst I will argue throughout this project that suburban fiction draws upon a rich symbolic inheritance, engaging with the hyperbole and gothic melodrama of post-war sociological studies – I stress that this engagement has always been both conscious and evaluative.

Recently reappraised by James Wood as the 'decade's great, terrifying indictment of suburban surrender [...] a perfect zero of hope,' *Revolutionary Road* ostensibly depicts a young couple, Frank and April Wheeler, contorted, repressed and ultimately shattered by the impenetrably shallow 'toyland' of 1950s suburbia.<sup>108</sup> In the concluding pages of the novel, Yates portrays a man driven to uncontrollable despair by the suicide of his wife. As he courses through the streets, Frank Wheeler temporarily forgets the people observing from behind the 'un-curtained windows,' and veers from the pavement and into a ravine in a symbolic act of non-conformity.<sup>109</sup> But there is no escape; Revolutionary Estates – with its unnatural, 'invincibly cheerful' architecture and moral vacuity – has literally 'not been designed to accommodate a tragedy.'<sup>110</sup> Ultimately, there is no *space* for Frank's unrestrained emotion or off-piste movements, and he is transformed into just another 'walking, talking, smiling, lifeless' member of the community.<sup>111</sup>

Yates' debt to the early post-war studies of Whyte and Riesman is undeniable. And yet, to claim that Frank and April are merely victims of an enervating suburban spatiality neglects Yates' more nuanced engagement with broader political and cultural change. His refusal to identify an alternative environment in which his protagonists find the spiritual fulfillment that they sense themselves to be lacking

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<sup>108</sup> James Wood, 'Like Men Betrayed: Revisiting Richard Yates's "Revolutionary Road,"' *The New Yorker*, 15 December 2008

<[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/12/15/081215crbo\\_books\\_wood](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/12/15/081215crbo_books_wood)> [Accessed 7 November 2013]; Yates, Richard, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Vintage, 2007), p.324.

<sup>109</sup> Yates, p.324.

<sup>110</sup> Yates, p.324.

<sup>111</sup> Yates, p.329.



suggests a more ambivalent attitude to their suburban angst. In fact, from the outset, Yates points to a *pre-existing* and more fundamental cultural malaise that is neither limited to, nor generated by, the characters' immediate environment. After performing their play, many of the Laurel Players *leave* the suburban community of Revolutionary Hill Estates and drive 'home to whatever older, less explicit promises of failure might lie in wait for them there.'<sup>112</sup> This oxymoronic promise of failure is key to understanding the ways in which a delicate lattice of social, cultural and political change leads Frank and April to seal their own tragic fate. In the world of the novel, suburban ennui is merely one of several factors influencing their decline. Indeed, in his excellent revisionist reading of *Revolutionary Road*, Tim Foster observes that Frank's alienation is partly borne of his long-standing belief that his wartime service has prepared him for a profound existence that never materialises, either in his city job *or* in his suburban home.<sup>113</sup>

Far from embracing the dominant sociological view of the suburbs as dangerously ahistorical hotbeds of disappointment and homogeneity, Yates points to the emergence of something much more interesting: a clichéd anti-suburban rhetoric emanating from the suburbanites themselves. Discussing what they perceive to be their own exceptional natures, Frank and April conclude that their only hope for surviving the bland, sentimental suburbs is 'to keep from being contaminated. The important thing was to remember who you were.'<sup>114</sup> Subsequently, they excuse their subscription to the suburban, commuter lifestyle by claiming a detached sense of irony.<sup>115</sup> Yet the fact that they are anything *but* unique in their sense of superiority is something of a paradox. In a culture in which the very desire for intellectual rebellion conforms to a prevalent – if contradictory – fantasy of individualism, it is virtually impossible to be a detached observer. In staving off their fear of averageness by criticising the averageness of others, Yates' characters merely implicate themselves further in inescapable cultural clichés about Freedom and Individualism. It is a bind that April momentarily acknowledges when she says to Frank, 'Remember what you said about the whole idea of suburbia being to keep

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<sup>112</sup> Yates, p.6.

<sup>113</sup> For a more in-depth, revisionist analysis, see Foster, pp.46-66.

<sup>114</sup> Yates, p.20.

<sup>115</sup> Yates, p.75.

reality at bay? We are the people you're talking about! How did we ever get into this strange little dream world?'<sup>116</sup> Thus, whilst Yates is implicitly critical of his characters' delusions – painting a portrait of Frank as an imaginative, though ultimately lethargic, individual – he never entirely condemns *or* absolves them.

The triumph of Yates' novel is, I would argue, its deliberate ambiguity: its characters are neither wholly at the mercy of their social and physical space nor entirely blameless for their downfall. Rather, their tragedy is brought about by their failure to *struggle* to create, transform and reimagine their environment. Where the problematic 1950s studies of Riesman and Whyte evoke civic engagement as the leaching of individualism, and privacy as autonomy, Yates' concluding tableau points to the fatal flaws of physical and intellectual isolationism. Standing outside his formerly cheery but now uninhabited house, Frank finally sees it for what it once was, 'alive with the sound of [April] and the sense of her.'<sup>117</sup> All too late does Frank realise that the possibility for a happy life existed in familial relationships and community interaction all along. In their self-constructed prisons, April and Frank literally and metaphorically die alone.<sup>118</sup>

In conceptualising suburban fiction as rigid, essentialist and disengaged from ongoing socio-spatial change, Jurca and Beuka inevitably limit the scope of what can be canonised as a suburban novel. It is precisely this that Lefebvre cautions against when he laments that history is too frequently viewed as nothing more than a sequence of dominant representations; 'the formation, establishment, decline, and dissolution of a given code.'<sup>119</sup> In selecting for analysis only those fictions and films that *do* more clearly exemplify a dystopian aesthetic, critics arguably embrace a flat and stagnant view of suburbia, and even help to propagate it.<sup>120</sup> Further, their limited

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<sup>116</sup> Yates, pp.110-111.

<sup>117</sup> Yates, p.324.

<sup>118</sup> Whilst Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, John Cheever's 'The Country Husband' (1954) and John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960) all conclude with images of obstinate everymen turning off their hearing aids, retreating further into their imaginations and running away from scenes of trauma, Yates does at least complicate Jurca's concept of an impenetrable white self-pity by bringing Frank closer to an understanding of his delusions. See John Cheever, 'The Country Husband,' *Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 2010), pp.420-446, and John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), p.288.

<sup>119</sup> Lefebvre, p.48.

<sup>120</sup> Also noted by Foster, p.26.

focus on the recognisable symbolic attributes of the fictional suburban terrain, and their lack of attention to the individuated ways in which the characters live and move within it, renders their own conclusions – that suburban fiction and film lag behind the complexity and spatial dynamism of contemporary suburbia – inevitable from the outset. Ironically, it is so often the characters' inability to dispense with dominant representations that is at the root of the violence and tragedy that these works depict: as we will discover, many of the novels actively foreground the fact that individuals cannot *help* navigating spaces in ways that run contrary to these master narratives, whether the characters mean to or not.

Nowhere is the canonical exclusion of competing discourses more apparent than in the conspicuous omission of *White Noise* (1985) – a novel that captures the breadth and density of the suburban experience – from most critical surveys on suburban fiction.<sup>121</sup> Set in a campus town known only as The-College-on-the-Hill, DeLillo's novel ostensibly charts a year in the life of Jack Gladney, a white middle-class professor of Hitler studies with a crippling fear of death. Since it does not deal with the construction and perpetuation of restrictive binary relationships between city and suburb, self and other, nation and evolving world system, but with their *dissolution*, it is perhaps unsurprising that it remains absent from the lineages that Beuka and Jurca trace. And yet, his work clearly engages many of the same themes as its predecessors, re-evaluating their concerns for a changing social and material landscape.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo does not simply address the changing ecology of the suburbs – its socio-economic and ethnic diversification and increasing marginality from the urban core – but attempts to embody it in a decentred, hybrid narrative space. Where *Revolutionary Road* reflects a somewhat conservative social realism, setting a precedent for an association between suburban fiction and literary realism that continued for several decades, *White Noise* materialises a postmodern hyperspace.<sup>122</sup> Whilst initially appearing to locate his suburb at the frontier between country and

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<sup>121</sup> Notably Kathy Knapp, Robert Beuka and Catherine Jurca.

<sup>122</sup> Christopher Kocela argues that 'American fiction about the suburbs [...] has come to be understood as synonymous with a rejuvenated form of American literary realism.' Kocela, *Fetishism and its Discontents: Post-1960 American Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.170.

city, wilderness and a heavily domesticated cultural landscape, DeLillo does not merely use suburbia to mediate between contrasting environments. Rather, he implies that nature has been displaced and subsumed by technology, creating a hybrid suburban spatiality in which the natural and the man-made are seemingly accorded equal value.

As already noted, the late 1970s saw an increase in surveillant marketing, with technological advance and an increasingly globalised marketplace creating a conflict between long-standing ideologies of freedom and autonomy, and their marketed expression.<sup>123</sup> In a convincing analysis of *White Noise*, Tim Engles argues that the novel's title conjures the angst of a white middle class forced to dispense with any vestigial myths of economic or racial exceptionalism, regional identity and individual autonomy, and adapt to an increasingly global culture.<sup>124</sup> In place of essentialist ideas about personal and place identity, DeLillo's fiction presents a never-ending babble of language evacuated of a univocal signifying potential. It is an angst played out in the character of Jack Gladney. Interestingly, Gladney's original investment in the new, sanitised suburb as a peaceful haven outside history is dependent on the city functioning in clear spatial and symbolic opposition; this is a dependence that DeLillo suggests cannot be sustained. Acknowledging the ubiquity of the airborne toxic event – a chemical spill that creates a noxious cloud that looms over everyone and everything – Jack dreads that there is 'no large city to blame for our sense of victimisation. No city to hate and fear. No panting mega-centre to absorb our woe, to distract us from our unremitting sense of time as the agent of our particular ruin.'<sup>125</sup> Instead, DeLillo's American landscape has become the embodiment of what Marc Augé has termed the non-place, a bland, monochrome geography of supermarkets and shopping malls to which no inherent or transcendent meaning might be ascribed, and in which space, not time, is the agent of change.<sup>126</sup>

Frank Lentricchia observes that DeLillo has been criticised for refusing to limit his work to a recognisable sphere or location, for positing a 'theory of society which

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<sup>123</sup> See Miller, pp.2-5 for more information.

<sup>124</sup> Tim Engles, "'Who are You, Literally?': Fantasies of the White Self in *White Noise*,' *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Fall 1999), pp.755-787, p.755.

<sup>125</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 2002), p.176.

<sup>126</sup> See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (New York: Verso, 2008).

refuses the lone gunman explanation of anything, but particularly of social crisis,' and which instead traces 'problematic action to an institutional, structural, or collective cause.'<sup>127</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to claim that DeLillo forsakes the personal in order to engage the political. Rather, just as he collapses the opposition between city and suburb, so too does he refute the dichotomy between the individual and the social. Ultimately, what distinguishes DeLillo's suburban fiction from that of many of his predecessors – and indeed, from early post-war social studies – is that it refuses to adhere to the modernist dialectic of alienation and internal coherence, which, given that it has been embraced as an archetypal postmodernist text, is perhaps not surprising. As such, DeLillo does not fall prey to perpetuating the idea of an exceptional, property-owning, middle-class identity through imagining it – paradoxically – as under threat. Meanwhile, much like Yates, he revels in an irony that Kathy Knapp attributes to the post-millennial fictions of Richard Ford, Jonathan Franzen and Philip Roth: namely, that his characters and the society they oppose 'share the same affliction: a predilection for valorising individual desire, the sole purpose of which is to keep in motion the wheels of production and reproduction upon which our market-driven liberal democracy turns.'<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, whilst DeLillo depicts this crisis of signification as a frequently destabilising experience, the fact that his characters not only endure, but also sustain meaningful relationships *within* this linguistic chaos points towards the possibility of deconstructing suburban ontologies and reimagining self, family and environment in more multifarious ways. At the same time, the fact that the novel's younger characters are more comfortable with their environment suggests that openness to a centreless, globalised nation might eventually prove empowering. In the void between sign and signifier, DeLillo begins to consider what languages we might use to move forward.

For John Updike, however, it is a void too great to navigate; the post-war suburb that loomed large in the cultural imagination increasingly represented a relic to a bygone era. The late 1980s and early 1990s marked an ambivalent time of socio-cultural

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<sup>127</sup> Frank Lentricchia, 'The American Writer as Bad Citizen,' *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp.1-7, p.4.

<sup>128</sup> Kathy Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel After 9/11* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), p.xxviii.

change and debate on both the national and global stage, with anxieties about sovereignty and the erosion of a 'core' culture set against a background of globalised labour, multiculturalism and a burgeoning identity politics. In a 1990 article for *The New York Times*, John Updike equates the erosion of American exceptionalism with the decline of suburbia's signifying potential, suggesting that it is no longer the ideal locus in which to revise and play out concepts of self and society, public and private. Discussing the death of Harry Angstrom – the now-aged protagonist of his Rabbit Tetralogy – Updike writes, 'Harry has lived his adult life in the context of the Cold War. He in some sense always justified [it], at the back of his mind, by a concept of freedom, of America, that took sharpness from contrast with Communism. If that contrast is gone, then that's another reason to put him, regretfully, to rest.'<sup>129</sup> In place of 'the supposedly inhibiting' suburb – once considered the embodiment of social and economic progress, and later perceived as an equally exceptional locus of disappointment – Updike appears to herald an even more bewildering 'late-capitalist, postmodern void;' one which transcends not only the boundaries between city and suburb, but between nation and world system too.<sup>130</sup> Rabbit's final efforts to enclose himself in a gated community thus emerge as a woefully insufficient bid to gain self-knowledge through spatial tactics that bury the contradictions of the American Dream. Encased in a 'fortress of sleeping retirees' – a stark image of a suburb on the brink of expiration – Updike's white everyman, and the broadly realist genre he inhabits, fade into irrelevance.<sup>131</sup>

## VI. Literary Criticism and the 'Suburbanisation' of 1990s American Fiction

Both DeLillo's shattering of binary logic and Updike's self-conscious termination of the everyman narrative invoke the need for entirely new languages of suburban identity and place. Yet, according to several literary critics, a selection of novels published during the 1990s fit neatly into an increasingly dystopian lineage.<sup>132</sup> In fact, a cursory glance at the novels under fire – Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994), T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), David Gates' *Jernigan* (1991) and *Preston Falls* (1998), Alice

<sup>129</sup> John Updike, 'Why Rabbit Had to Go,' *New York Times Book Review* (5<sup>th</sup> August 1990).

<sup>130</sup> Foster, p.22.

<sup>131</sup> John-Paul Colgan, 'Going it Alone but Running out of Gas: America's Borders in John Updike's "Rabbit" Novels,' *Irish Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 11-12 (2002), pp. 73-86, p.81.

<sup>132</sup> See Catherina Jurca, Kathy Knapp, Anis Shivani and Robert Beuka for examples.

Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002) and A.M. Homes' *Music for Torching* (1999) – arguably reveals fictions *more* tethered to obsolete models and inherited cultural clichés of suburban alienation than their more nuanced predecessors.<sup>133</sup> In these works, familiar, white middle-class characters languish in sterile suburban environments that are seemingly impervious to global – or even national – developments. As with Richard Yates, John Updike and John Cheever before them, each writer foregrounds a narrative of (male) self-pity and existential crisis, populating their novels with dissatisfied drug-addicts and adulterers whose material advantages and familial security cannot compensate for their ill-defined alienation, dispossession and fear. A.M. Homes' *Music for Torching*, for example, does not simply adopt the Westchester territory of much of Cheever's work, but its timbre, even going so far as to paraphrase sections of his most famous stories, 'The Country Husband' (1954) and 'The Swimmer' (1964). Moody, Sebold and Eugenides, meanwhile, seem to sidestep the complexities of the present by setting their fictions in the well-documented, predominantly white, suburbia of the 1970s. In many ways, David Gates' *Jernigan* reads as a revision of *Rabbit, Run* for the 1990s, with the protagonist fleeing from home to *indulge* his bitterness rather than escape it.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the novels were granted 'short shrift' by critics concerned with the 'relative modesty of formal shifts in literary treatments of the suburb and the conspicuous continuities of thematic preoccupation.'<sup>134</sup> For Jurca, they merit no more than a passing mention; in *White Diaspora*, she justifies confining the entire trajectory of the post-war suburban novel to a brief concluding chapter, titled 'Same as it Ever Was,' claiming that its authors are 'heirs, rather than inaugurators of a tradition' preoccupied with 'remythologis[ing] the suburb as the parodic antithesis of the good life.'<sup>135</sup> Instead of exploring the new suburban landscapes as they emerge, she claims that these fictions imagine them as exemplary locales that house all the paradoxes and the neoliberal corruptions at the heart of the American Dream. Capturing their detached apoliticism and the near pathological

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<sup>133</sup> This is not an exhaustive list; it represents a selection of narratives named on more than one occasion by critics attempting to define the 1990s suburban novel. I would argue that one might add Donald Antrim's *Elect Mr Robinson for a Better World* (1993) and Wells Tower's 'Raw Water' (2010) to this list.

<sup>134</sup> Jurca, p.14.

<sup>135</sup> Jurca, p.167.

misery of their characters, Kathy Knapp consigns them to Richard Ohmann's earlier category of 'illness stories' that transform 'deep social contradictions into a dynamic of personal crisis' and that conclude 'at best, in mere recovery – in the achievement of personal equilibrium vis-à-vis the same untransformed world.'<sup>136</sup> In this section, I not only challenge these reductive ascriptions, but also suggest that literary criticism risks reducing the suburban landscape in ways that literature itself does not. Briefly reconsidering these texts as fictions that purposefully engage with this process of cultural flattening, I argue that it is precisely the characters' inability to conceive of their own lives as meaningful beyond their socio-cultural inheritance that leads to their downfall.

In his 2004 polemic, 'The Shrinking of American Fiction,' critic Anis Shivani claims paradigmatic status for Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* and A.M. Homes' oeuvre, arguing that their broadly realist works are, paradoxically, 'no longer part of the ordinary fabric of life.'<sup>137</sup> Instead of metaphorically questioning 'the compass points, transgress[ing] the borderlines of the imagination,' they testify to a desperate *retreat* into insular spaces and established social and symbolic paradigms, as though their authors are unable to keep pace with global socio-spatial change.<sup>138</sup> Where DeLillo evokes a post-suburban hyperspace, these writers simply 'dish their and our familiarity with these types right back to us, without fantastic embellishment' and 'in the most regurgitative sense.'<sup>139</sup> Whilst not exclusively vilifying novels set in white middle-class suburbs – a gentrifying Brooklyn is also the setting of one of his targets – the rhetoric Shivani uses to deride the 'sheer deluge' of commercialised fiction is strikingly reminiscent of early, anti-suburban social studies *and* more contemporaneous criticisms of an uncontrolled, aesthetically barren sprawl. Describing the writing as 'bland, uniform, and unappetizing in precisely the way we might expect from an assembly-line product,' he claims that 'behind the publicity and glitter, there is a sickness, a pervasive unease, and its name

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<sup>136</sup> Richard Ohmann, 'The Shaping of a Canon: US Fiction, 1960-1975,' *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (September 1983), pp.199-223, p.212, as qtd. by Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism*, p.xxvii; Ohmann, p.217, as qtd. by Knapp, 'Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe Trilogy,' p.508.

<sup>137</sup> Anis Shivani, 'The Shrinking of American Fiction,' *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Autumn, 2004), pp.680-690, p.681.

<sup>138</sup> Shivani, p.680.

<sup>139</sup> Shivani, p.681.



is self-involvement.’<sup>140</sup> And for this peculiar ‘suburbanisation’ of fiction, we – the increasingly homogenised and small-minded reader – are largely to blame. Seduced by the writer’s preference for showing us our ‘faces in the mirror of popular culture, with no outside reference point to check its insularity and bleakness,’ the reader uses the contemporary novel as a form of ‘self-therapy’ to indulge and ultimately assuage his or her petty ‘suburban nightmares’ about the dissolution of privilege.<sup>141</sup> In the total interior of the novel, reader, writer and characters indulge a fantasy in which victimhood is evoked as ‘the essence of existence itself [...] somewhere to roost in the shadow of the real world, and not as a matter of shame, but honour.’<sup>142</sup> As the American landscape sprawls, its culture becoming ever-more homogenised, its fiction – Shivani suggests – curdles, shrinks and becomes involute.

By insisting that novelists situate themselves *outside* mass culture whilst invoking this culture as increasingly ubiquitous, Shivani leaves little scope for the American novel to carve out another space in which to reshape and revive itself for a changing world. Yet, to claim that all novelists engaged with this widespread culture of nihilistic self-involvement are simply endeavouring to reinforce its appeal denies them the power of critical distance and misses the ironic, parodic qualities of the texts he examines, qualities which uncover *as* stereotypes the tropes they appear to embrace. Moreover, in hastily dismissing novelistic portrayals of white middle-class emotions as irrefutably self-indulgent and invalid, Shivani ignores the fact that certain suburbanites might experience social, cultural and political displacements that are entirely real. In her review of Jurca’s *White Disapora*, Susan Edmunds engages Marx’s critique of the commodity form to challenge the notion that feelings of alienation and isolation are merely ‘make-believe forms of suffering, fully recuperable as hidden sources of contentment and upward mobility.’<sup>143</sup> Marx postulates that the scramble for material gain goes ‘hand in hand with an increasingly irretrievable sense of human interdependency and connection.’<sup>144</sup> Since suburbia has long been associated with placing a premium on upward mobility,

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<sup>140</sup> Shivani, p.680.

<sup>141</sup> Shivani, p.682.

<sup>142</sup> Shivani, p.685.

<sup>143</sup> Susan Edmunds, ‘Accelerated Immobilities: American Suburbia and the Classless Middle Class,’ *American Literary History*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer 2003), pp. 409-421, p.415.

<sup>144</sup> Edmunds, p.415.

representations of this felt loss of community might be more accurately interpreted as powerful indicators of genuine crisis. In the following chapters, I strenuously avoid disavowing cynicism, inertia and determined disengagement as simply undesirable character traits that might be wished away, and instead address the structural realities that play determining roles in shaping these sentiments. At the same time, I consider irony and cynicism as – in *some* instances – indicators of hope's impossibility, not as chosen states of mind.

Rather like early suburban social studies, Shivani, Jurca and Beuka's literary criticism seems to suggest that those inhabiting the suburbs, either physically or imaginatively, are incapable of real insight and objectivity. Meanwhile, those 'outside' it are uniquely qualified to understand its failures and mechanisms. By fleshing out the idea of a suburban character type that is at once ubiquitous and fundamentally illusory, Shivani seems intent on transforming suburbia into a simulation against which a self-conscious 'America' strives to define its actuality. In other words, in creating and isolating hyperbolic characters that embody America's worst fears about itself, Shivani transforms suburbanites into tropes that the 'nation' can vilify to comfort itself. I would suggest that this is precisely what the authors of the fictions Shivani derides warn against.

Other literary critics have noted the parodic qualities of these suburban novels. Beginning her 2011 article for *American Literary History* with the question, 'Has the suburban novel exhausted itself? Kathy Knapp evokes a literary tradition lurching *consciously* towards its own obsolescence; wallowing in inherited tropes and stubbornly inhabiting a crumbling symbolic infrastructure as the geographical, social and literary landscape changes around it.<sup>145</sup> Yet what Knapp goes on to describe is not the slow attrition of an increasingly apolitical and aesthetically conservative form, but the violent implosion of the suburban narrative and the apocalyptic curtailment of its characters' lives. In the final pages of *The Ice Storm*, *Music for Torching*, *The Virgin Suicides*, *Elect Mr Robinson for a Better World* and *The Tortilla Curtain*, characters' complacencies are shattered by apparently unexpected floods, suicides, school shootings and devastating snow-storms that thrust their

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<sup>145</sup> Knapp, 'Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe Trilogy,' p.500.

suburban community back into the path of history, precarity and larger social, political, and ecological contexts. In rendering their environments ‘uncertain and frightening,’ Knapp claims that the novelists ultimately expose their characters’ ‘personal troubles [...] for what they are: the inconsequential luxuries of a bygone era’ and put to rest the tropes of insularity and existential crisis that characterised the works of Yates, Updike and Cheever.<sup>146</sup>

Nevertheless, the apparent destruction of the internal logic of the fictional suburb offers little in the way of hope that more enlivening and multifarious counter-narratives, and more responsible suburbanites, might rise from the ashes. Instead, the birth of the fictional suburb as a more fluid spatiality – often symbolised by environmental disasters that literally devastate its structural foundations – is frequently accompanied by the death of each novel’s youngest, most uncorrupted character and the simultaneous curtailment of the narrative. In *The Ice Storm*, Mikey is electrocuted by a fallen electricity pylon. In *The Tortilla Curtain*, blind baby Socorro drowns in a river after her parents’ temporary shelter is knocked down in a landslide. In *The Virgin Suicides*, every one of the Lisbon sisters commits suicide. The execution of the novels’ next generation does not merely evoke the involution and unsustainability of the characters’ lifestyles, but symbolically evacuates the suburban ‘genre’ of its own futurity, leaving it incapable of ‘coming of age’ or of making itself new. Nowhere is this self-immolation more visceral, and arguably more final, than in *Music for Torching*. Concluding with the words ‘It’s Over,’ immediately after the fatal – and supposedly unanticipated – shooting of couple Paul and Elaine’s youngest son, Sammy, the novel not only martyrs the wrong character, but also denies its readers the opportunity of watching its protagonists move forward. For Knapp, this text marks a definitive end to a ‘genre’ that has long-since ‘passed its expiration date.’<sup>147</sup> Increasingly conscious of its stereotypical vision, but incapable of ‘telling other kinds of stories about an environment that has historically been a bastion of racial and class privilege,’ the 1990s suburban novel can apparently only reject the matrix of its symbolic

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<sup>146</sup> Knapp, ‘Richard Ford’s Frank Bascombe Trilogy,’ p.515.

<sup>147</sup> Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism*, p.xxii.

inheritance by cannibalising itself; on acknowledging its historical abstractions and limitations, its anxious novelists merely pronounce it dead.<sup>148</sup>

And yet, in all cases, the novels' visceral conclusions do not simply mark the introduction of an entirely unexpected postmodern contingency in the form of natural disasters and violent outbursts. Rather, each narrative is pervaded by a peculiar sense of inevitability, their denouements marked – whether explicitly or obliquely – from the start. Long before the bodies of the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides* are discovered in their dilapidated suburban home, bloated on pills, hanging from the rafters, suffocated by exhaust fumes, their deaths have been rendered inescapable, both by the fictional community, and by the narrative itself. Beginning with the line, 'On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide,' the narrative enacts a painful decline towards a conclusion presaged in the title.<sup>149</sup> Meanwhile, on reaching the ending of *The Ice Storm* and *Music for Torching*, the reader is forced *back* over the narrative to realise, belatedly, that the instruments responsible for the deaths of Mikey and Sammy – a fallen power line and a gun in an unlocked cabinet – have loomed ominously over the narratives from the start. Thrust *back* into a symbolic logic at the very moment when it is supposedly being wrenched open, the novels arguably exchange one master narrative for another; an apocalypse of devastating finality which at once justifies the heretofore indefinable fears of their characters – implying that their very construction as white, middle-class and suburban marks their fate – and reinserts them into a pseudo-Enlightenment notion of history as crisis and cycle.

To analyse these texts in this way ignores the fact that each of the novels' adult figures are provided with plenty of opportunities to acknowledge the very real dangers of their predicament throughout. Contrary to professions of its apocalypticism, the ending of Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* – where a landslide sweeps away an exclusive Los Angeles community – invokes a plausible outcome of building in an unstable and incendiary environment, without recourse to historical

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<sup>148</sup> Jurca, p.16.

<sup>149</sup> Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p.3.

precedent.<sup>150</sup> Problematising the slow-growth movement that emerged during the 1990s as a solution to suburban sprawl, Boyle uncovers a racialised, hegemonic discourse propagated to protect individual interest and property values, and a reassertion of an exclusionary nationalism in response to America's increasing reliance on foreign industry and systems. In this satire of middle-class liberalism, earnest characters congratulate themselves for having established a safe, green, socially just community, whilst rigorously constructing physical and semantic barriers against the non-white labourers that facilitate their consumption.

Like the two novelists discussed in the following chapter, Boyle goes to great lengths to emphasise the very real effects of attempting to live within a carefully constructed fiction. For all its fortifications, both symbolic and physical, the gated suburb of Arroyo Blanco cannot remain authentic, internally coherent and autonomous in a changing metropolis. In destroying the physical boundaries that invoke magical barriers against globalisation, postcolonialism and crises of cultural identity, Boyle ultimately forces his characters to situate their irresponsible actions within larger social, political and environmental frameworks, and to recognise their reliance on those that they had sought to exclude.

Today, it is generally accepted that climate change and capitalist expansion are intricately related, and that the environment can no longer be conceived of simply as a stage for human activity. *The Tortilla Curtain* is just one example of an emergent strand of suburban fiction that engages (inter)national geopolitical change and refuses to allow characters to cling to hegemonic myths of rugged individualism and territorial rights. Instead, it foregrounds a 'natural' disaster fuelled by specific material, cultural and political relations. Donald Antrim's *Elect Mr Robinson for a Better World* (1993) – a savage satire that takes a swipe at centrally planned communities that promote distrust in democratic government and state-intervention – is another example. In Antrim's unstable Florida landscape, poor planning, defensive localisms, a total lack of democratic accountability, and a profound inability on the part of the town leaders to respond to the physical specificities of their environment

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<sup>150</sup> According to Mike Davis, 'sprawl increases runoff water pollution' which in turn causes erosion, which evokes floods and mudslides.' See Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (London: Picador, 1999), p.134.

and the educational needs of its inhabitants, produce a literal and richly symbolic quagmire and transform its inhabitants into modern feudalists. Ultimately these fictions do not simply embrace bleak visions of socio-political fragmentation and environmental chaos, but rather attend to the specific dynamic spatial politics galvanising such change.

## Conclusion

Taken together, the texts I discuss here and in the following chapter present an urgent case for deconstructing projects and ideologies based on falsified notions of truth and certainty, and make clear that any utopian project is, essentially, exclusionary. Yet several of them also imply that the failure to construct any alternative imaginaries could result in nihilism or, worse still, in complicity with neoliberal capitalism. In chapter two, I analyse in detail two frequently vilified texts that appear to invoke suburban life as something of a postmodern mire, the novels' apparently plotless trajectories seeming to signify what Lauren Berlant calls the impasse – 'a thick moment of on-goingness,' of treading water, of existing in 'a middle without boundaries, edges, a shape' – that accompanies the dissolution of middle-class privilege and the onset of precarity.<sup>151</sup>

Nevertheless, I argue that the texts covered by the next chapter emphasise the physical and discursive realms as mutually constitutive and explore the potential for fiction to embrace multiple perspectives concurrently. Whilst Wells Tower resolutely deconstructs the symbolic structures that burden his suburban landscape – refusing to allow his protagonist to linger under the illusion that his centrally planned community embodies either the Enlightenment frontier or a gilded cage – A.M. Homes goes even further, considering the scope for a new language that escapes the oppressive dominance of its inheritance.

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<sup>151</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.200.

## 2. Rupturing the ‘Total Interior:’ The Violent Restructuring of Inherited Paradigms

On publication, both A.M. Homes’ *Music for Torching* (1999) and Wells Tower’s ‘Raw Water’ (2010) received something of a critical roasting, lambasted for portraying angst-ridden suburban stereotypes in barely recognisable environments. ‘Raw Water’ – a short story published in *McSweeney’s* as part of an edited collection titled *2024 AD* – was broadly defined as a dystopian narrative about Nature, in the form of insidious waterborne bacteria, visiting retribution upon those seeking to curtail it.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, *Music for Torching* was characterised as a gothic tale of entrapment, in which the house itself is ambiguously responsible for its inhabitants’ decline into madness and violence.<sup>2</sup> Both were deemed so brazenly allegorical, their characters’ surnames – Nevis (meaning island) and Weiss (pronounced vice) – signifying their attributes, that they prohibited the suspension of disbelief. The few critics that recognised a self-conscious ‘return to history’ in *Music for Torching*’s conclusion still argued for the text’s overall interiority, claiming that the murder of Paul and Elaine’s neglected son reconstructs the world according to a conservative moral measure, and transforms the narrative into a self-contained parable of crime and punishment.<sup>3</sup> For most, the novel demands a return to the reassuring – if limited – family values imaginatively imposed upon the suburbs of the 1950s. Ultimately, both texts were considered to reveal more about suburbia’s literary inheritance than its material reality. They dabble with narratives of postmodern contingency only to renounce them.

In what follows, I argue that Homes and Tower use satire, irony and parody to problematise neat utopian and dystopian projections of the suburbs, and trace the *waning* of their characters’ faith in the legitimacy of such narratives. Drawing on Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism, which posits that renewed appeals to energetic striving and collective conquest represent pernicious attempts to obscure the new

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<sup>1</sup> See Alex Shepherd, ‘Interview with Wells Tower,’ *Full Stop*, 2 March 2011, web. <<http://www.full-stop.net/2011/03/02/interviews/alex/wells-tower/>> [Accessed 20 August 2014].

<sup>2</sup> According to Kathy Knapp, *Music for Torching* ‘fits neatly into what Bernice Murphy identifies as the suburban gothic tradition, since it unearths the deviance and brutality lurking in the hearts of seemingly normal, upstanding citizens.’ Kathy Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel After 9/11* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), p.123.

<sup>3</sup> See Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

slackness of the American Dream, I identify in both texts an ever-widening chasm between signifier and signified – house and home, money and freedom, democratic progressivism and actual community – in an era of intense capitalist restructuring. In Homes’ and Tower’s heavily mediated suburban worlds, myths of security, fulfilment and intimacy under capital do not represent ‘maps toward an easy way of life,’ so much as ‘aspirational anchors,’ responsible for ‘shrinking the imaginary social field to a repetition of a remembered and yet unrealized fantasy.’<sup>4</sup> As the symbolically overdetermined site upon which these normative promises were once imagined to be fulfilled, borne of ideas of manifest destiny and pioneering expansion, the suburb is a fitting locus for the authors’ exploration of the slipping points between the ideal and the reality. At the same time, Homes and Tower warn that renouncing these discourses altogether could yield equally flawed master narratives of entropy and nihilism.

This chapter is divided into two main parts. In part one, I explore the gated community as a metaphor and manifestation of an enduring, destructive emphasis on individualism and frontier heroism in an increasingly geographically unstable and ideologically contested environment. Section one examines the resurgence of a reactionary utopianism in response to changing spatial and political configurations of the American landscape at the end of the twentieth century. It reevaluates Francis Fukuyama’s supposedly triumphalist tract, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), as an ambivalent text about the ‘victories’ of Western liberal democracy, and reconsiders claims that suburbia – and particularly the gated suburb – materialises the end of history by excluding social diversity and walling itself off from ongoing debate.<sup>5</sup> Section two examines the extent to which Wells Tower’s ‘Raw Water’ embraces a vision of the gated community as a post-historical, degenerate utopia, and I ultimately refuse the critical consensus that Tower portrays suburban space as having an inherently enervating power. Far from embodying a move forwards into an egalitarian haven, the protagonists’ relocation represents a regressive retreat from

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<sup>4</sup> Lauren Berlant, Interview: ‘Lauren Berlant on her book *Cruel Optimism*,’ *Rorotoko*, 5 June 2012 <[http://rorotoko.com/interview/20120605\\_berlant\\_lauren\\_on\\_cruel\\_optimism](http://rorotoko.com/interview/20120605_berlant_lauren_on_cruel_optimism)> [Accessed 21 November 2016]; Lauren Berlant, ‘Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in La Promesse and Rosetta’ *Public Culture*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (December 2015), pp.273-201, p.291.

<sup>5</sup> Claims made by David Harvey, in *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p.168, and Mike Davis in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 2006), p.6.



the unsavoury legacies of the past and the ongoing complexities of the present. Whilst the erosion of myths of progress has engendered what Edward Soja calls a potentially revolutionary 'spatial turn,' Tower suggests that a rejection of historical precedent and consequence altogether could incite another essentialist narrative of circularity, stasis and decay.<sup>6</sup>

Section three dispenses with the utopian/dystopian binary and posits Tower's suburban world as resolutely historical. It underlines the human causes behind the characters' degeneration from tranquil sympathetic individuals into violent and estranged consumers, and argues that Rodney Booth's devolution into primitivism occurs because he has refused to engage with and relinquish the regressive master narratives that have blighted suburbia's history. Using the isolated, obstinately self-sufficient community of Anasazi as an apt material expression of a persistent national narrative, Tower exposes the dangerous paradoxes inherent in the Enlightenment construction of America as a united, democratic nation of individualists.

Part two moves beyond Tower's act of postmodern deconstruction to examine A.M. Homes' attempt to reconfigure the language associated with suburban development. It argues that, in metafictionally invoking the falseness of her fiction throughout, Homes demands a re-evaluation of suburbia as a cultural site, shaped and reshaped through social relations and discourse. The first section of part two examines the novel's symbolic inheritance in detail and asks why, given all the spatial and social diversity of the contemporary suburb, Homes appears tethered to deterministic links between space and character. Comparing her portrait of suburban alienation to John Cheever's, I observe a growing doubt that solace and stability might inhere in familial relationships or the suburban home. Section two argues that Homes' examination of suburban 'homelessness' is evaluative, and contends that the characters themselves inhabit these cultural stereotypes with an uncanny self-

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<sup>6</sup> The transdisciplinary turn that Soja identifies in cultural studies and the humanities during the 1990s is towards a 'renewed awareness of the simultaneity and interwoven complexity of the social, historical, and spatial dimensions of our lives, their inseparability and often problematic interdependence.' Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), p.7.

consciousness, perpetuating their own subjection despite recognising the cruel and increasingly unsustainable nature of their attachments. Section three observes that Paul and Elaine's apocalyptic endeavour to destroy their home and start again betrays a perverse longing to bestow their house with an intrinsic value and transformative power. Moreover, their actions bespeak a desire to reinsert themselves into a somewhat comforting master narrative of devastation and renewal. The fact that their attempt fails produces a traumatic disturbance of the symbolic order, and leaves the couple feeling that they have no authentic connection to the world whatsoever.

Yet it is precisely this failure that introduces a valuable fissure between sign and signifier, destabilising the total logic of the suburban landscape and paving the way for a cautious re-definition of self and habitus. Ultimately, the couple's unwillingness to restructure the domestic form semantically as well as literally is what leads to their horrifying – and very real – demise. In section four, I claim that Paul and Elaine's dogged reinvestment in the cult of the home results in them banishing their children from their house and setting in motion a chain of events that culminates in the death of their son. Here, the characters' involute questioning finds its expression in the figure of a sacrificial child who becomes the banished signified which the entire novel was working towards. Homes scatters clues throughout to suggest that Sammy's murder at the hands of a classmate is not merely a consequence of physical displacement and parental neglect, but takes place because their generation is unwilling and unable to inhabit the draining symbolic ecology inherited from the previous one. At the same time, it attests to Homes' own reasoned refusal to endorse the continuity of a critical tradition in which white middle-class adults behave like children.

In section five, I consider the extent to which Homes' penultimate chapter posits an alternative to the dualisms of defeatism and triumphalism, domination and revolution, totalitarianism and fragmented individualism, offering a glimpse of a small-scale politics of localised intersubjectivity that is provisional and open-ended. I also speculate about why Homes does not permit this nearly utopian moment to last. Finally, I argue that whilst Homes, like Tower, evokes generational rupture to suggest that neither the retreat to old symbols nor the embrace of irony will lead their

characters forward, it is the novel's form that ultimately offers the most plausible alternative. Embodying what has been referred to by Mary K. Holland as a 'postmodern realism,' Homes' novel refuses to repress its own machinations in its depiction of tragedy.<sup>7</sup> Instead, it foreshadows events, traces lineages and invokes a conversation that extends far beyond its own pages. Whilst residing in a liminal space between contingency and symbolism, realism and metafiction, atemporality and linear cause-and-effect destroys the illusion of narrative distance, it also necessarily disrupts naturalised modes of reading the suburban landscape. What is revealed in the novel's final chapter is that the space for affect coexisted within this inauthentic world of signs all along.

The fact that *Music for Torching* is read so closely in this chapter requires justification. According to the various critics discussed in chapter one, the novel is exemplary rather than exceptional, simply the most visceral example in a 'genre' that uses unprecedented violence to conclusively snub itself out. As I have already suggested, I too consider Homes' novel to be representative of a broader trend in suburban fiction, though for very different reasons: namely, Homes uses parody, irony and violence to renegotiate suburbia's problematic cultural and social legacies. Uniquely interesting is the title's foregrounding of the relationship between aesthetics and destruction. Where DeLillo's *White Noise* traces the clamour and din of the breakdown between sign and signifier, Homes' *Music for Torching* appears ambivalently entranced by its melody. On one hand, the title implies that the novel's aestheticisation of destruction is self-conscious, and that it ultimately *advocates* a portrayal of violence as a means of rupturing and deconstructing suburbia's exclusionary socio-cultural lineages. Read differently, however, it emerges as an acknowledgment of the 'violent' (or simply negative) potential of aestheticising the unravelling of suburbia as we know it without positing an alternative that can be of use outside literary practice. This suggestion speaks to many of the larger themes of this project, a number of which will be addressed in chapter three when I turn to the ethics of articulating a poetics of sprawl.

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<sup>7</sup> Mary K. Holland, 'A Lamb in Wolf's Clothing: Postmodern Realism in A. M. Homes' "Music for Torching" and "This Book Will Save Your Life,"" *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (May 2012), pp. 214-237.

I conclude this chapter by observing that, even as their characters struggle to encase themselves in the familiar, though destructive, symbolic ecology of American suburbia, Homes and Tower engage in a process of decolonisation; deconstructing the assumptions of the ‘genre’ and dramatising the failure to define the territory of text and topography. In the end, there is no ‘going home’ to empty notions of communal striving or to static, idealised conceptions of space.<sup>8</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to conceive of either author as entirely pessimistic, or as nostalgic for a vague, ‘lost modernist, utopian sixties, destroyed by postmodern global consumer capitalism or identitarian sectarianism.’<sup>9</sup> They may never invoke egalitarian diversity – remembered *or* desired – as a plausible alternative to master-narratives of modernity: their suburban worlds are so far from collective political action, and their characters so devoid of motivating rage, that large-scale socio-political change is never posited as an option. Instead, lingering at the site of political depression and futility, Homes and Tower examine the relationship between political ideals and the practice of politics. This is not to suggest that home and family have been robbed of their significance altogether, or that the contemporary suburb offers nothing more than surface and simulacra. Rather, it represents the authors’ reluctance to prescribe new models for living. In part, therefore, Homes and Tower favour a literature that ‘ungrounds’ its readers, encouraging them to question the very foundations of grand narratives of social change. At the same time, by emphasising the role of cultural and linguistic imperatives in the process of space production, the authors do not merely expose the extent to which suburbia has been restricted by language in the past. In depicting cultural fictions that become axiomatic, they hint at literature’s extraordinary potential to inspire material change.

## 2.1. Progress and Devolution in Wells Tower’s ‘Raw Water’ (2010)

*‘The liberation from material necessity marks a fundamental change in the human condition. We are in uncharted territory. Consequently, we need new maps.’<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> A.M. Homes, *Music for Torching* (London: Granta, 1999), p.351.

<sup>9</sup> Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p.5.

<sup>10</sup> Brink Lindsey, *The Age of Abundance: How Prosperity Transformed America’s Politics and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p.2.

In *The Age of Abundance: How Prosperity Transformed America's Politics and Culture* (2007), Republican Brink Lindsey advances an image of millennial Americans as pioneering frontiersmen negotiating the physical and philosophical terrain of an ever-receding horizon of capitalist development. According to Lindsey, there has been a radical break with the past, and America has entered the uncharted 'realm of freedom.'<sup>11</sup> Blithely invoking an age of mass prosperity, multi-ethnic mobility and technological innovation, Lindsey intimates both a sense of disorientation and a cautious optimism that America might guide the world through the new millennium.<sup>12</sup> His portrait is of a hyper-connected era in which production has been supplanted by consumption and relations 'between the nation state and an evolving, integrated world system' are undergoing substantial change.<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps surprising, then, that his rhetoric of progress is rooted in an Enlightenment vision of America as a hostile wilderness to be 'conquered, vanquished and ultimately redeemed by godly men.'<sup>14</sup> Lindsey's words offer a telling insight into the rekindling of reactionary cultural inscriptions of space just as socio-spatial change is rendering them most unstable.

If one temporarily sets aside the controversial nature of his ideas – offered shortly before the financial crash, and amid growing dissatisfaction with America's uneven development and poorly regulated sprawl – it could be argued that Lindsey does not promote consumerism's physical expression so much as urge that 'inevitable' economic and material expansion be accompanied by spiritual reflection. In an increasingly decentred landscape of expanding informal economies and the shrinking of state welfare, the modern individual is faced with a new challenge, Lindsey implies: to retain both personal and political bearings in an *ethical* wilderness, in which the final frontier of 'enough' remains an ever-moving target. In Lindsey's evocation of an internal landscape, one can discern a rallying call for a considered, and more importantly, *collective*, exploration of the social and affective stakes.

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<sup>11</sup> Lindsey, p.18.

<sup>12</sup> I use the word 'blithe' to describe Lindsey's triumphant rhetoric because 2007 marked a time of widening gulfs between rich and poor and the redistribution of wealth upwards as capitalism became increasingly predatory.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Charley, 'Time, Space and Narrative,' *Writing the Modern City: Literature, Architecture, Modernity*, ed. by Sarah Edwards and Jonathan Charley (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), pp.1-18, p.6.

<sup>14</sup> *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), p.19.

In this respect, Lindsey's appeal is not so different from Fredric Jameson's call for a cognitive mapping to make sense of global changes of scale. In 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' (1983) Jameson posits that growing rifts between physical space and dominant spatial imaginaries – created by rapid corporate expansion, new migrations, technological advances, housing deregulation, shifting political and economic relations – have engendered a crisis in the American experience of space, leaving individuals incapable of mapping themselves according to objective coordinates or accepted socio-cultural reference points. Contending that this 'alarming disjunction between the body and its built environment [...] can itself stand as the symbol and analogue of that even sharper dilemma, which is the incapacity of our minds [...] to map the great, global, multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects,' Jameson makes reinstating externally verifiable boundaries appear vital.<sup>15</sup> Yet one is left asking what form these 'mappings' should take, who constitutes the sovereign 'we' that Lindsey and Jameson describe, and, more importantly, who does not.<sup>16</sup> In part one, I examine the pernicious effects of a politically powerful geographical imagination that continues to envision space as empty, inert territory waiting to be domesticated by the courageous makers of history progressing across it; a mythology which assumes that time only truly begins when a geographical area is first appropriated, and which enables a convenient amnesia about alternative historical trajectories, cultures and peoples existing simultaneously in space. Interestingly, even as Lindsey celebrates the 'universal' march of neoliberal capital, neatly assimilating other spaces into inferior positions in a single 'historical queue' of preordained Western expansion, his words betray a longing for order, lines and borders; for coherent, homogenous communities that stand united against a backdrop of global change.<sup>17</sup> It is a nostalgia for a time and place that has never existed.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society,' *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), p.16.

<sup>16</sup> I do not wish to tarnish Lindsey, an outspoken Republican, and Jameson, a Marxist scholar, with the same brush. Nevertheless, I maintain that the 'crisis' that Jameson invokes is most commonly experienced as such by those who previously felt themselves to be masters of their surroundings.

<sup>17</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2005), p.5.

<sup>18</sup> No geographical location, however small, can truly embody a static ideological framework, since the experience of a place varies immeasurably from person to person.

In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (2010) Wendy Brown observes that ‘the detachment of sovereign powers from nation-states threatens an imaginary of individual and national identity dependent upon perceivable horizons and the containment they offer.’<sup>19</sup> Put under pressure, this lingering imaginary has given rise to a plethora of intransigent responses, ranging from the recovery of the sentimental rhetoric of empire displayed by Lindsey to concrete spatial practices, such as gating, that perform a sovereignty that no longer exists. In the next section, I explore the various tensions between ‘opening and barricading, fusion and partition, erasure and re-inscription’ that exist in an increasingly globalised world, and that manifest in dangerous local nationalisms.<sup>20</sup>

### **I. The Degenerate Utopia**

In 1992, as the shadow of the Cold War dissipated, political theorist Francis Fukuyama advanced a radical paradigm, claiming that, ‘what we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.’<sup>21</sup> Influenced by Hegel’s conceptualisation of history as a linear, evolving process of competing ideologies, Fukuyama’s work heralded the culmination of historical progress in the achievement of a universal liberal hegemony. Ostensibly, his views recalled Marx’s postulation that society would continue to move through various modes of production – tribalism, feudalism, capitalism – until it overcame class-based ideological conflict. Crucially, however, Fukuyama’s vision did not posit peaceful, global convergence in the establishment of a communist utopia, but under the homogenising, ever-expanding banner of free-market capitalism.

The work caused a global sensation, with Derrida maligning its apparently triumphant tone and Western-centric ignorance of the ‘innumerable singular sites of suffering’ the world over.<sup>22</sup> Others argued that Fukuyama had performed an

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<sup>19</sup> Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), p.38.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, p.19.

<sup>21</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.xi.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, (Routledge, New York, 1994), p.85.

audacious ‘sleight of hand,’ disguising a neoliberal agenda with his rhetoric of organic and inevitable historical progress, and attempting to quash ongoing debate with the claim that a post-ideological age of universal freedom was already upon us.<sup>23</sup> For many, his treatise was no more than private interest masquerading as the universal transcendence of social, political and economic frontiers.

Yet even the title of Fukuyama’s work – *The End of History and The Last Man* – conveys a rather more complex, ambivalent and even sinister relationship between capitalist culture and the ‘liberated’ individual within it. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All* (1891), Friedrich Nietzsche had coined the term The Last Man to describe the antithesis of a mythical individual whose appearance had been heralded by Zarathustra. Whilst the presaged ‘Overman’ would be a pioneer with the moral fortitude to create his own values and community, The Last Man was an apathetic consumer, whose physical security and material well-being had left him devoid of commitment and tired of life.<sup>24</sup> Less triumphalist than his detractors have acknowledged, Fukuyama’s work intimates that in the absence of progressive ethical conflict, unobstructed globalisation is being accompanied by the inertial collapse of mankind. Meanwhile, the historical epoch of modernity, ‘with its political conflicts and upheavals, its innovations and revolutions, its autonomous and creative subject, and its myths of progress, democracy, Enlightenment,’ is over.<sup>25</sup> In the years before 9/11 heralded what many refer to as the return of history, Jean Baudrillard expressed none of Fukuyama’s ambivalence about the end of modernity, positing that America was locked in an irrevocable state of ‘inertial implosion.’<sup>26</sup> According to Baudrillard, the apparent dissolution of material obstructions to accumulation and the ‘freedom’ from the constraint of norms had created a society of dejected, directionless consumers, ill-motivated for radical political change.<sup>27</sup> And yet, as the twentieth

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Michael D. Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002), p.48.

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. by Martin Clancy (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard, as paraphrased by Douglas Kellner, ‘Jean Baudrillard After Modernity: Provocations on a Provocateur and Challenger,’ *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 2006), pp.1-37, p.25.

<sup>26</sup> See Mackubin Thomas Owens, ‘9/11: The End of the End of History,’ *The National Review*, 11 September 2003 <<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/208001/end-end-history-mackubin-thomas-owens>> [Accessed 11 August 2017]; Kellner, paraphrasing Baudrillard, p.25.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. by Chris Turner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p.25.



century drew to a close, the rhetoric of democratic progress showed no sign of abating, and the conflation of national fortitude with the accumulation of private property continued to hold sway.

What a closer look at Fukuyama's work betrays is a conceptualisation of 'History' as somehow other to, or originally separable from, the global free-market system, with the latter eroding and eventually eradicating the former. In suggesting that history and difference can only survive if it remains 'outside,' or closed-off from, the global sphere, Fukuyama inadvertently posits a connection between history and the territorial sphere of the 'local.' Characterising the 1990s, a decade in which America became simultaneously more connected to the global landscape and more politically splintered than ever before, Nancy and James Duncan observe a burgeoning 'fear of placelessness and a longing to belong that produces a kind of localism and reinvigorated nationalism.'<sup>28</sup> Their words uncover a tension in American culture, a commitment to gaining self-knowledge through radical spatial/temporal closure and the fantasy of an Us/Them dichotomy, and a yearning to feel at 'home' in an increasingly fractured nation.

Whilst advocates of New Urbanism and gated compounds have purported to be countering political marginalisation and the brutal modernism of suburbanisation, their attempts to solve America's social problems through architectural partitioning are at best naïve, and at worst a paradigm for the *victory* of private interest and the elimination of the public realm. Angered by such politically autonomous, racially monochromatic 'solutions,' David Harvey argues that instead of encouraging individuals to rediscover a sense of community belonging, stability and human limits, these artificial spaces, with their arbitrary boundaries, help to create a new brand of 'militant particularism' and enhance hostility towards others.<sup>29</sup> 'Employing the codes and history of a privileged, white, capitalist class' – often adopting street names that evoke exclusively European 'historical' connections to the landscape – these 'traditional' communities simply erase the realities of environmental and

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<sup>28</sup> James S. Duncan and Nancy G. Duncan, *Landscapes of Privilege: The Politics of the Aesthetic in an American Suburb: Aesthetics and Affluence in an American Suburb* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.5.

<sup>29</sup> Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, p.158.

ethical conflict.<sup>30</sup> In retreating into an idealised, autonomous domain, they do not promote economic, racial and social diversity so much as suggest that a new American history might be created from scratch. With no historical aura and minimal public space, such micro-societies are both confining and eutopic; their inhabitants are marooned in time and space and corralled through a spatial governance into ever-smaller enclaves as their burgeoning fear of diversity defines borders.<sup>31</sup>

In the following section, I contend that this bleak vision finds apt expression in Wells Tower's 'Raw Water' – a monstrous satire of the triumph of free-market capitalism, and a vision of material and moral implosion. Here, characters desperate to escape the jurisdiction of an apparently draining and oppressive system seal themselves in a leisure-orientated utopia that promises all the pioneering freedom, individualism and community spirit associated with post-war suburbia. Like the New Urbanist town of Seaside, the Anasazi Valley is a centrally planned community founded upon an uneasy juxtaposition of temporalities: a haphazard melange of Greek place names, nineteenth-century architecture and modern golf courses. In this almost heterotopic spatiality, in which abstract ideas and utopian values gain material presence, everything appears to be geared towards incessant leisure and consumerism. Crucially, even the natural focal point of the village – a futuristic 'do-it-yourself ocean' – is new and artificial.<sup>32</sup> Yet, for all its planners' attempts to recreate 'forgotten' small-town practices, Anasazi is exposed as little more than an extravagant unreality and an essentially private investment. Cocooned from broader social and political developments, its occupants do not establish desired forms of community, governance and social equality, but rather regress into denial and despondency, all the while suffering from a crippling fear of invasion.

## II. The Causal Power of Space

The fact that the gated Anasazi community has failed before the story even starts, paints a particularly bleak portrait of social decline in an age of flourishing private

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<sup>30</sup> Edward, J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, *Fortress America: Gated Communities and the United States* (Brookings Institution Press: Washington DC, 1997), p.25.

<sup>31</sup> Mike Davis defines eutopic communities as 'literally no-place' subdivisions, 'in sterilised sites stripped bare of nature and history, master-planned only for privatised family consumption.' Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*, p.6.

<sup>32</sup> Wells Tower, 'Raw Water,' *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern: 2024 AD*, Vol. 32 (22 October 2010), p.59.

investment and state-shrinkage. Whilst the area's revolutionary approach to countering sea-level rise – by piping water into a desert depression – points towards a burgeoning social conscience and a desire for ecological harmony, Tower is quick to affirm the decadence, human greed and environmental recklessness of its planners and inhabitants. After flocking to the ocean-side to 'quietly embezzl[e] the budget of desalinated water that should have been pumped back into the sea,' the wealthy population just as rapidly forsakes the area when the weather conditions fail to meet their standards and the sea mutates into a salty red brine.<sup>33</sup> In the space of just twelve years, Anasazi is transformed from a bustling locus of economic and social activity into a deserted, vandalised ghost town, populated by 'maroon ancients' and 'unwealthy people.'<sup>34</sup> Devoid of any historical referents or regional qualities that would accurately locate it in space or time, it remains suspended in a state of material and moral entropy, its apolitical community languishing sometime after the end of history has seemingly eradicated all barriers to consumption.

In Tower's hyperbolic vision, one can discern a condensed, deeply critical, history of the American landscape as a whole. Indeed, though the story is set in a fictional town in 2024, its 'squatty sprawling bunkerish jobs of off-white stucco' are instantly recognisable as the homogenous, absurdly temporary structures that have dominated the suburban tracts since the 1950s.<sup>35</sup> It is this familiarity that makes the story so unsettling. Located at the outermost perimeter of North America – on the border with Mexico – the town literally represents America's final frontier. The fact that it too is dominated by tract home wastelands suggests that sprawl has become ubiquitous and decline is absolute. Here, the American Dream has long since 'collapse[d] under the weight of its own excess,' its hubristic dream houses lost to foreclosure.<sup>36</sup>

For Rodney and Cora Booth, however, there is intense personal satisfaction to be gained from valiantly re-populating America's desolate landscape. As they crest the final hill on their arduous, disorientating journey to their new home, they are bathed

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<sup>33</sup> Tower, p.59.

<sup>34</sup> Tower, p.69.

<sup>35</sup> Tower, p.60.

<sup>36</sup> Patrick O'Donnell, 'Postwar Los Angeles: Suburban Eden and the Fall into History,' *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*, ed. by Kevin R. McNamara (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.59-74, p.70.

in a 'warm light' and confronted with an almost paradisiacal view; a 'giant, tranquil plain' and a mirage-like ocean that emerges from the hostile wilderness.<sup>37</sup> In this isolated, apparently post-capitalist neighbourhood – in which money never changes hands, there is no traffic, and the remaining inhabitants fish from the plentiful sea – the couple appears to have discovered a true space apart; an unmediated realm in which they might exchange economic progress for a direct relationship with the environment. Rodney is energised instantly: once a 'tired, sad and confused' city worker who spent his days locked indoors, he becomes an active, adventurous individual who rises with the sun and dreams at night of 'conquering famous wildernesses.'<sup>38</sup> One might be tempted to refer to such a transformation as a redemptive regression: a peeling away of the accumulated layers of bureaucracy and coercion, and a return to a simpler, almost Thoreauvian America. Though attaining inner transcendence in an untamed wilderness might be implausible in the sprawling suburbs, Tower arguably implies that the contained wilds of a once-exclusive community might offer a new form of pioneering for a new age.

Yet Anasazi is not an accidental consequence of unplanned growth, latterly abandoned by narratives of capitalist progress. From the outset, the unnatural condition of this autonomous realm and the cultivated ignorance of its inhabitants is apparent. Though the sea is referred to as 'a dark red tide' teeming with life, it remains curiously immobile.<sup>39</sup> 'Still and thick as house paint,' the geometrically perfect construction is not a symbol of organic fecundity so much as a product of social and spatial engineering.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the majority of Rodney's most 'spontaneous' gestures of self-expression appear to have been engineered by the town's architects and investors. When he uses his initiative to prize oysters from the bay, he is merely mirroring the actions of the 'fisherfolk [who] raised families hauling fish out of a former bowl of hot dirt,' and who inspired investors to construct Anasazi in the first place.<sup>41</sup> Thus, a move that might have appeared to embody a sovereign return to nature might more accurately be described as a controlled coercion within a rigorously managed capitalist space. The characters' attempts to

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<sup>37</sup> Tower, p.58.

<sup>38</sup> Tower, p.57; p.74.

<sup>39</sup> Tower, p.80.

<sup>40</sup> Tower, p.60.

<sup>41</sup> Tower, p.59.

differentiate themselves are ‘transformed, by capitalism’s operations, into yet another set of consumer choices,’ such that the freedom promised by these concepts remains perpetually out of reach.<sup>42</sup>

On encountering the town’s property developer, Arn Nevis, it becomes apparent that the couple’s pretensions to autonomy are fallacious. As soon as they enter the ‘bright little citadel’ of the Nevis’ gated home, Rodney and Cora are confronted with a vast, insatiable capitalist in the midst of masterminding the town’s future by ‘hot-boxing’ his competitors.<sup>43</sup> A leeching patriarch who objectifies Cora by ‘peering unabashedly at [her] chest,’ Arn is capable of reducing and stultifying all those around him, shouting his guests into submission and looking ‘ready to pounce on his smaller companions.’ And yet, as an individual utterly devoid of redeeming features, he is both larger than life and strangely transparent, his body equated with the ‘great bay windows’ of the houses he owns.<sup>44</sup> From the outset, Arn appears less significant as an autonomous character than as the embodiment of late-capitalism’s power structures and the personification of its restrictive space.

Edward Soja contends that acts of violence and rebellion are, in part, fuelled by ‘unjust geographies’ designed to ‘oppress and exploit and dominate, to create forms of social control and discipline.’<sup>45</sup> In other words, socially manipulated space is not merely the physical *consequence* of social action, but the condition for prohibiting or inspiring further interaction, taking on a causal power of its own. The tyranny of the gated community – its enforced isolation, elitism and rejection of plurality as a key strategy to reproduce difference – is central to his argument. Whilst Tower never fully explains Rodney’s growing sense of dissatisfaction and escalating acts of violence, he scatters clues to suggest that Rodney is a victim pushed to his limits. The day after meeting the intimidating Arn, Rodney awakes with a ‘general unease’ and a sense of being watched, and spends hours reading a Jack London paperback,

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<sup>42</sup> Adrian Johnston, ‘Review of Julia Kristeva, “The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt” (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000),’ *Metapsychology*, Vol. 6, No. 10 (March 2002) <[http://metapsychology.mentalhelp.net/poc/view\\_doc.php?type=book&id=1012](http://metapsychology.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=book&id=1012)> [Accessed 21 November 2016].

<sup>43</sup> Tower, p.61; p.62.

<sup>44</sup> Tower, p.62.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Soja, ‘Spatial Justice and the Right to the City: An Interview with Edward Soja,’ conducted by Frederic Dufaux, *Justice Spatiale*, No. 3 (March 2011), pp.1-17, p.6.

*Call of the Wild* (1903), which tells the story of a domesticated dog whose innate savagery resurfaces after years of brutal mistreatment.<sup>46</sup> That this presages Rodney's own act of transgression – to break into Arn's 'thorny fort' and sleep with his daughter – would seem to imply that modern man is driven to conflict because his impulses have been suffocated.<sup>47</sup> Amid his desperate attempt to express himself and, according to Rodney, free 'Katherine Nevis, the darling prisoner of the house,' Rodney is horrified to discover that Arn is watching him 'from the blue darkness of the eave [...his] mouth parted in expectancy.'<sup>48</sup> Whilst highlighting the moral vacuity of late capitalism, Tower points to the impossibility of escaping its mechanisms: even Rodney's greatest act of rebellion has been anticipated, possibly even engineered.

The most compelling evidence for the causal power of space can arguably be found in the mysterious sea at the centre of *Anasazi*, which literally manipulates and transforms the bodies of all who enter it. Initially, the water's effect on Rodney is 'wonderfully vivifying,' leaving him feeling 'stripped clean, and peeled to a new young flesh.'<sup>49</sup> Yet this new lease of life becomes an unbearable burden when he finds himself without a social, sexual or physical outlet for his joy. Feeling caged and frustrated, his mind 'roves to other women' who might be able to sate him, and other environments in which he might feel at peace.<sup>50</sup>

Since the sea – like the architecture around it – has been artificially created to serve as a disposable commodity, it could be read as an allegory of the tyrannical power of space to restrict the freedom of the human body within it. Yet Tower also introduces an almost-mythological ambiguity into his story: at one point, Cora encounters a man who has taken great measures to 'sheathe' himself both from the ancient bacteria within the sea *and* from his neighbours.<sup>51</sup> Terrified by the thought that these highly resilient organisms have 'put a couple of million species on the planet,' Willard Kamp conceptualises the basic structures from which life has evolved in

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<sup>46</sup> Tower, p.63.

<sup>47</sup> Tower, p.79.

<sup>48</sup> Tower, p.80; p.81.

<sup>49</sup> Tower, p.67.

<sup>50</sup> Tower, p.74.

<sup>51</sup> Tower, p.68.

terms of disease and contamination.<sup>52</sup> And indeed, despite his radical and exclusionary views, he is depicted as the sanest and most articulate person in the story. Meanwhile, Rodney and Arn – who regularly bathe in the sea – are increasingly associated with animalistic primitivism, as though interaction itself is to be equated with devolution.<sup>53</sup>

### III. Deconstructing the Dystopia

For reviewer Alex Shepherd, ‘Raw Water’ is nothing more than a low-brow science-fiction story about Nature seeking vengeance by ‘supercharging everybody’s Darwinistic faculties.’<sup>54</sup> Yet this straightforwardly dystopian projection of the story fails to acknowledge that it is not the material expression of global capitalism that ensnares Tower’s characters in a cycle of nihilistic decline so much as *lingering*, hegemonic myths of rugged individualism and utopian assumptions about ‘what is or is not given by nature.’<sup>55</sup>

Tower undermines any mythical investment in the sea’s corrupting effects throughout, asserting that ‘the real story of the water was very dull. It was just a lot of ancient, red, one-celled creatures that thrived in high salt, and were no enemy to man.’<sup>56</sup> Similarly, for all his initial despotism, Arn – like the sea he has created – is not the perpetrator of Rodney’s decline. When Rodney encounters him in the ‘hard noonday light,’ he notices that Arn’s hair is ‘in disarray and his hands tremble in Parkinsonian fashion.’ Rodney concludes, with some satisfaction, that he looks ‘antique and unwell.’<sup>57</sup> Far from suppressing the town’s inhabitants with his persona or through the medium of the apparently restrictive space he has created, Arn appears to be a victim to both his own failing body and the requirements of the Bureau of Land Management. Whilst it is not clear whether his problems are physical, mental or financial, he only feels safe when he finds ‘a spot with his back to the wall and a good view of the door.’<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Tower, p.69.

<sup>53</sup> Katherine’s face is described as a ‘chimpanzee’s muzzle’ and one of her friends uses the insult ‘bite my fur’, Tower, p.71.

<sup>54</sup> ‘When literary fiction people sneer at science fiction, this is why,’ says Shepherd, web.

<sup>55</sup> David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p.251.

<sup>56</sup> Tower, pp.59-60.

<sup>57</sup> Tower, p.73.

<sup>58</sup> Tower, p.76.

In *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (2000), Soja argues that investing in the concept of an invisible, but ubiquitous, social mechanism as the sole cause of personal and social ills can ‘too easily lead to despondency and withdrawal,’ engendering a sense of communalism as the enemy of true individualism and diverting attention from ‘new opportunities for progressive change built in to the fortified and reterritorialised geographies of the postmetropolis.’<sup>59</sup> Certainly, on acknowledging Arn’s implicit weakness, Rodney interacts with the environment in a very different way. Roving the isolated shoreline in the fading light, the restless, energised protagonist is struck by the thought that ‘all that space [is] nobody’s but his.’<sup>60</sup> Yet, far from feeling at peace with the landscape, Rodney’s thoughts drift to the one person within ‘his’ space whom he cannot claim as his own: Katherine Nevis. That he falls to ‘zealously raping the dirt’ whilst thinking about her serves as a staunch reminder that the ethos of rugged self-determination upon which his artificial community has been constructed has its roots in a violent, colonialist patriarchy.<sup>61</sup> Rodney’s feral desire to surmount all obstacles and mark his territory is both despicable and ideologically regressive, grounded in reimagining the women around him as pastures to be vanquished and commodities that will ‘shut up when he talks.’<sup>62</sup>

Crucially, Rodney is not propelled to extremes of aggressive conflict because he has been imprisoned by ‘coercive, top-down ideals of architectural form’ and denied the opportunity to express himself, but because there are *no* barriers to his desires and no central, political authority to keep his morals in place.<sup>63</sup> In *Fortress America: Gated Communities and the United States* (1997), Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder rightly observe that certain manifestations of ‘globalisation and economic restructuring weaken existing social relations and contribute to the breakdown of traditional ways of maintaining social order.’ When ‘social control mechanisms and their associated institutions, such as the police and schools, are no longer seen as

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<sup>59</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p.302.

<sup>60</sup> Tower, p.78.

<sup>61</sup> Tower, p.78.

<sup>62</sup> Tower, p.74. In the following chapter, I examine the persistent equation of women with space and men with time.

<sup>63</sup> DeKoven, p.80.



effective,' the gated community begins to look like a 'viable and socially acceptable' solution to fears about the breakdown in local control.'<sup>64</sup> Yet, of course, physical gating does nothing to address the root causes of the problems, such as failing public services and infrastructure, to which gating is a response. Moreover, when theoretically equitable laws, dependent upon a shared sense of justice and democratic accountability, are replaced by a focus on individual gain, civic order risks breaking down altogether. Behind Tower's dark satire one can discern a savage criticism of the notion that free-market capitalism has eradicated tyranny and united the American nation in the pursuit of common goals: instead, in the absence of imposed legal, moral or political boundaries, competitive consumption has spiralled out of control. Confronted with 'a world strewn with free riches,' Rodney's powers of restraint and reflection disintegrate, leaving him certain that it is his inalienable human *right* to accumulate land, commodities and people.<sup>65</sup>

Tower's vision, like Fukuyama's, posits a society of physically liberated, but ideologically and emotionally imprisoned, individuals. Nevertheless, Tower suggests that it is only once his characters have jettisoned their social responsibilities to work and interact, and physically retreated from the outside world altogether, that they come to think of themselves as isolated in space and exempt from any moral code. In cutting themselves off, Tower's characters do not exchange an imagined community replete with ideological contradictions for a real one. Rather, just as Wendy Brown warns of 'the decline of state sovereignty' in 'a liberal ontology,' the subject is returned 'to an intensely vulnerable and violable condition of existence.'<sup>66</sup>

With no collective impetus to work towards, and no consequences for their actions, both Rodney and Arn are consumed by one deeply sadistic and self-destructive impulse: to conquer and destroy. Unable to understand why 'the desert's wealth of joy seem[s] to have slipped down the rills and drainages,' Rodney is like Berlant's paradigmatic American subject, locked in a cycle of decay, incapable of looking beyond artificial and unfulfilling consumer 'pleasures,' and propelled to ever-greater depths of indignity in the pursuit of meaning.<sup>67</sup> In the fictional town of Anasazi, the

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<sup>64</sup> Blakely and Snyder, p.17.

<sup>65</sup> Tower, p.74.

<sup>66</sup> Brown, p.79.

<sup>67</sup> Tower, p.79.

‘zenith’ of liberal democracy is represented by the total destruction of the landscape and the deterioration of the characters’ bodies and souls.

And yet, for all his reckless individualism, Rodney appears to emerge victorious: having surmounted the final moral and material obstacles to his desires, he finds himself at the heart of a new family, and at the centre of the most expensive house in Anasazi. In all this, his wife is seemingly none the wiser and his lovers comprise a sixteen-year-old girl and her sixty-year-old mother. Rodney is literally the last man, emerging as the aggressively patriarchal head of a new, primitive tribe. However, Rodney is not a heroic, Nietzschean Zarathustra in possession of a new ideology. Rather, he is the literal and symbolic embodiment of Fukuyama’s Last Man: a conscienceless, dejected consumer who has attained only the shallowest form of universal truth and material freedom, and at the cost of his own humanity. His is a monstrous, degenerative family tree – composed of a ‘daughter’ he has violated, a vulnerable older wife, and a ‘son’ he desires to tear from its mother’s breast and carry out of the room.<sup>68</sup> Whilst Rodney experiences a fleeting elation at his success, Tower suggests that there is no future in such a situation, not least because there is nothing left to conquer. That his final actions – gulping wine to stop his burgeoning headache – mirror Arn’s, suggests that Rodney too will ultimately be destroyed by his own selfish excess.

In David Foster Wallace’s 2011 novel, *The Pale King*, an unnamed tax official makes an astute observation about his social reality, declaring, ‘Americans are crazy, we infantilise ourselves. We don’t think of ourselves as citizens – parts of something larger to which we have profound responsibilities. We think of ourselves as citizens when it comes to our rights and privileges, but not our responsibilities.’<sup>69</sup> It is a cultural paradigm that is literalised to startling effect in the concluding tableau of ‘Raw Water.’ Nestled at the breast of an older woman and struggling to control his aggressive feelings towards her needy child, Rodney has exchanged the dignity of ‘long friendship and love from the deep heart’ for the compulsive behaviour and moral vacuity of a child.<sup>70</sup> That the realisation of his dreams – to conquer both

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<sup>68</sup> Tower, p.83.

<sup>69</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Pale King* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011), p.130.

<sup>70</sup> Tower, p.58.

people and property – coincides with the nadir of his emotional regression is a staunch reminder that ‘progress’ in a moral vacuum is the antithesis of social, cultural and political evolution. However, Rodney is not absolutely without fellow feeling. On one hand, his inability to connect with the root cause of his unwanted sensations of guilt and his vehement attempts to ‘dull the pain’ with drink, paint a critical portrait of an individual who would rather insulate himself from his problems than face them head on.<sup>71</sup> Yet it also suggests that his disregard is a trait that has been learned over time. By setting his bleak tale in the near future, Tower prompts his readers to consider the potential consequences of continuing to build or inhabit spaces that negatively impact upon human experience without acknowledging that the environment is not ever-renewable. At the same time, it implies that it is not too late to reconsider inherited models of understanding in the present.

Crucially, the richly multivalent space that Tower seeks is always there, hovering on the periphery in the form of the constantly evolving, culturally invested sea. Arguably the Anasazi Sea serves as a powerful metaphor for history itself – a resilient, culturally imbued entity that refuses to die away.<sup>72</sup> At the heart of a town whose inhabitants have cocooned themselves from broader socio-political structures and refused to look beyond the consumer pleasures of the moment, the sea that is both man-made and rich with multiple forms of life emerges as an apt symbol of the nation we should be striving to realise; one that is constructed by capitalist endeavours, but not victim to them. It is the protagonists’ failure to renounce the limiting and paradoxical principles that have plagued America for centuries that leaves them without hope, and without a future. Locked in a form of global Imperialism – against plurality, against foreigners, against one another – Tower’s characters are not in need of a more fluid spatial environment so much as a more inclusive sense of themselves as spatially and temporally continuous. Ultimately, the most absurd ‘fiction’ in ‘Raw Water’ is not the notion that the Anasazi Sea is filled with potent, timeless bacteria, but the idea that man can live in isolation and outside time.

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<sup>71</sup> Tower, p.83.

<sup>72</sup> It is interesting, too, that the Anasazi were an ancient Native American culture that inhabited what is now the Southwestern United States.

In *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), Jameson identifies two, often-connected manifestations of the utopian impulse; one is intent on realising a utopian programme through tactics such as radical spatial closure, Othering or the toppling of a regime, and the other is a more covert impulse, finding its way to the surface in ‘social theory, [...] liberal reforms and commercial pipedreams, the deceptive yet tempting swindles of the here and now, where Utopia serves as the mere lure and bait for ideology.’<sup>73</sup> It is this lingering strain of utopianism – harder to recognise than its spatial counterpart, but remarkably potent nonetheless – that Berlant refers to as cruel optimism. In many ways, Tower’s bleak concluding tableau perfectly exemplifies Lauren Berlant’s condition of the ‘impasse’ or ‘slow death;’ an endlessly stretched-out ‘transitional moment between a habituated life and all of its others [...] A time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward.’<sup>74</sup> Stuck somewhere between success and exhaustion, having rejected the past and refused futurity, Rodney is left ‘dithering, tottering, bargaining, and generally being worn out by the promises that [he has] attached to in this world.’<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, Berlant professes that the impasse can only ‘house us’ temporarily in an era in which ‘traditional infrastructures for reproducing life – at work, in intimacy, politically – are crumbling at a threatening pace.’<sup>76</sup> In part two, I turn my attention to what happens when Berlant’s impasse begins to give way.

## 2.2. Desecrating the Suburban Home in A.M. Homes’ *Music for Torching* (1999)

Though not addressed in Knapp’s 2011 essay on the status of suburban fiction, Wells Tower’s 2010 contribution to the ‘genre’ arguably evokes precisely the exhaustion to which she alludes.<sup>77</sup> Unable to escape the straightjacket of the past, Tower’s jaded and small-minded characters simply implode in an entropic present. *Music for Torching* effectively begins where Tower’s story ends, in a state in which optimism for the future has long-since ossified into an internalised compulsion to repeat

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<sup>73</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), p.3.

<sup>74</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.4.

<sup>75</sup> Berlant, p.28.

<sup>76</sup> Berlant, p.5.

<sup>77</sup> Jurca supports the idea of a suburban ‘genre’ of impasse, suggesting that ‘stillness, stasis, stuckness dominates in these novels.’ Jurca, p.147.

inherited paradoxes, and the suburban landscape has been wholly evacuated of its utopian potential. Bored, lonely, and inept at communicating, Paul and Elaine perform escalating acts of violence to sever these cruel attachments, ultimately setting fire to their suburban home – the dominant symbol of their repression – in the hope that it will at once destroy their restrictive community and liberate them to remake their lives. Yet the apocalyptic moment that would confirm the existence of, and finally release them from, the dominant socio-symbolic space never comes. Their attempt to invoke a radical break with the past is an unalloyed failure; not only does their house emerge miraculously unscathed, but their unchanged lives are rendered devastatingly meaningless too. The couple's retreat to ironic detachment is accompanied by the novel's descent into a series of bland, interchangeable vignettes.

It would be easy to read Homes' text as a product of the postmodern age – as defined by Jameson – wherein 'neither past nor present is available except as [...] simulation,' and in which art is no longer generative. In this mediated landscape, artists and critical commentators simply cannot express any meaningful reaction to the state they find themselves in. Parody, for example, is replaced by 'pastiche, a random recycling of the past,' whilst irony becomes 'impotent, incapable of making qualitative judgments about the world – about the difference between what we encounter and what we expect – and so capable only of expressing our apathetic mockery of the simulated world in which we live.'<sup>78</sup> In a more astute reading of *Music for Torching*, Mary K. Holland argues that Sammy's death 'ultimately reinterprets this postmodern narrative of meaningless consumption as a restrictive economy in which the sacrifice of a son can make meaning for his parents, and all the novel's heretofore pointless signs can signify.'<sup>79</sup> However, though the reader might only recognise this internal logic at the novel's close and be tempted to agree that it effects a move *backwards* from 'postmodern indeterminacy to realist logic, from meaningless lack to meaningful loss,' the novel's action in fact exists on both these planes *simultaneously*.<sup>80</sup> As such, the denouement reveals Paul and Elaine to be both empowered individuals who have failed to take responsibility for one another

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<sup>78</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), as paraphrased by Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, p.119.

<sup>79</sup> Holland, p.123.

<sup>80</sup> Holland, p.98.

and disempowered pawns in a circular fictional logic. Sammy's death, meanwhile, is at once a culmination of the parents' neglect *and* an event foreshadowed by signs and motifs that they could not possibly have known how to read. Whilst Elaine feels she 'should have known something was wrong, [...] should have paid more attention,' it is the careless reader – placed at a unique vantage point – who is truly guilty for failing to read the signs.<sup>81</sup> That Homes' language games and scattered clues become more apparent on a second, more vigilant, reading, does not suggest that the linguistic and the human operate in separate spheres, or that one must be explored at the expense of the other. Indeed, the opportunity to read in a more engaged way is always there. Rather, it testifies to Homes' belief in the novel and its reader's power, invoking fiction as uniquely capable of playing with the texture of reality.

Far from upholding the geographical, social and cultural boundaries associated with suburbia, therefore, both Homes' suburb and the novel that depicts it are spaces where these boundaries begin to break down. *Music for Torching* is multi-layered; replete with meta-fictional games, inter-textual echoes and oscillations between surface and depth. Drawing attention to the falseness and superficiality of fiction throughout, Homes demands a re-evaluation of suburbia as a cultural site – produced through social relations and discourse – and galvanises her reader to begin this process. Hers is an almost Derridian privileging of literature that will not be passed over or simply embraced without remark.

## **I. Home is Where the Hurt is**

Homes' chronicle of suburban dysfunction begins in familiar territory: the Westchester setting of Cheever's Shady Hill stories. Nevertheless, her work resonates with her predecessor's less through the specificities of place, than through an inherited timbre of white middle-class malaise. In the opening pages, Westchester is not simply a vaguely sketched backdrop for Homes' class-based misery, but an entirely unarticulated void beyond the suffocating interior of Paul and Elaine's house. As with Cheever's 'The Swimmer,' *Music for Torching* opens with the aftermath of a sexually charged dinner party. Yet where the former employed the

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<sup>81</sup> Homes, p.342.

motif of the swimming pool to subtly denote the stagnancy, decadence and rigidity of a community united in consumption and unruffled by broader concerns, Homes offers up a wretched display of gluttony, performed by caricatures of suburban angst. ‘The potatoes were swimming in butter, the salad was drenched in dressing,’ complains Paul, before contemplating smearing congealed fat on his wife and forcing himself upon her as she does the washing-up.<sup>82</sup> In response, Elaine mimes dragging a carving knife across his neck before returning to her domestic duties. Conducted with a chilling nonchalance, these eruptions of savagery do nothing to drag the couple from their private miseries; each remains inexplicably bored and ‘unbelievably unhappy.’<sup>83</sup> Nearly fifty years after Gordon, Gordon and Gunther ‘exposed’ the banality, materialism and resulting mental deficiencies at the heart of suburban America, Homes invokes suburbanites driven mad by prosperity with similarly sensationalistic glee. For all the spatial and social diversity of the contemporary suburb, Homes appears tethered to a vision of a deterministic link between space and character. Move to the insular suburbs, and encase yourself in a homogenous house, she implies, and you will lose all perspective.

In *White Diaspora*, Jurca argues that twentieth-century suburban fiction is marked by the ‘systematic erosion of the suburban house as a privileged site of emotional connection and stability.’<sup>84</sup> Using the term ‘diaspora’ ironically, Jurca claims that, ‘if the physical dimension of the geopolitical diaspora is about imagining and forging spiritual and cultural connections to the place that you are not, the white diaspora of the suburb is instead about the failure to produce such connections to the place that you are.’<sup>85</sup> This inability to feel ‘at home’ is due to suburbia’s frequent construction as a wholly symbolic, and therefore unspecifiable, terrain in fiction and social studies, and Jurca specifically cites Cheever as an heir to this tradition. In the concluding scene of ‘The Swimmer,’ social outcast Neddy seeks the comfort and privacy of home only to discover that he is locked out and ‘the place [is] empty.’<sup>86</sup> Standing on the threshold, looking in, he is confronted with the rift between his image of ‘home’ as a locus of spiritual satisfaction and its reality. However, in

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<sup>82</sup> Homes, p.1.

<sup>83</sup> Homes, p.15.

<sup>84</sup> Jurca, p.4.

<sup>85</sup> Jurca, p.8.

<sup>86</sup> John Cheever, ‘The Swimmer,’ *Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 2010), pp.776-788, p.788.

conceptualising this as a *literal* homelessness, Cheever at least maintains the semblance of a link between material and spiritual shelter, thereby offering the somewhat comforting suggestion that a centre of stability and imaginative identification might persist in the material world or within the sanctity of familial relationships.

In Homes' novel, conversely, the materially rich home is not an unfettered realm of individualism and marital security from which Paul and Elaine are *literally* exiled, but a physical and psychological prison in which they are incarcerated. Beset by the sense that the house is disintegrating around them – 'the paint is cracked and peeling,' the 'sink's stopping up' – Paul and Elaine reimagine their physical space as a parasitic force that consumes their time and energy, diverting them from acting on 'all [their] ideas and good intentions [...] until there isn't anything left.'<sup>87</sup> As they tussle with one another, wielding kitchen knives and consumer goods, their material acquisitions are transformed into the 'artifacts of spiritual, cultural' and – in this case – physical 'oppression.'<sup>88</sup> According to Jurca, 'central to the logic of homelessness is the premise that as the suburban house becomes the primary locus and object of consumption for the white middle class, the artifacts and habits of domestic culture are seen to jeopardize or to destroy the home's emotional texture.'<sup>89</sup> In Homes' singularly bleak text, not even the couple's shared misery can provide consolation: in a visceral scene, a teary confession of their mutual desolation is not accompanied by a moment of emotional closeness but by an act of rough, loveless sex that is chillingly indistinguishable from a rape.<sup>90</sup> In rendering a relationship that is constructed almost entirely of competitive declarations of misery, Homes implies that her characters' very identities as white middle-class suburbanites are grounded in their alienation from a fantasy of home, security and familial belonging. In her deeply pessimistic vision, the suburban house is transformed into the epicentre of trauma; its inhabitants are homeless in their own homes.

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<sup>87</sup> Homes, p.5; p.2; p.5.

<sup>88</sup> Jurca, p.9.

<sup>89</sup> Jurca, p.5.

<sup>90</sup> Homes, p.15.



Yet one only has to acknowledge the peculiar sense of theatricality that pervades the opening pages to recognise that Homes is not merely reiterating a supposedly unchallenged literary trope. Indeed, from the outset, both author and characters inhabit these cultural stereotypes with a curious self-consciousness. The five-page vignette that opens the novel reads like a script, composed largely of direct speech and complete with stage directions – ‘They go upstairs’ and ‘They undress’ – for navigating this limited interior space.<sup>91</sup> Set entirely in the kitchen, the first chapter reads like a grotesque parody of a 1950s situation comedy, in which the man is the head of the household and his wife a paradigm of suburban domesticity. The effect is not merely to evoke the one-dimensionality of the characters, making them appear as actors trapped in a pre-planned performance, but to draw attention to the fictionality of the text itself. Arguably, this supports Knapp’s more nuanced claim that the suburban novel of the 1990s enacts its own demise, unable to imagine a way out of its symbolic inheritance.<sup>92</sup> As Elaine reproaches her drunk husband and he ‘circles around her like an animal’ – each of their bleak confrontations giving way to further cycles of misery – Homes’ declaration that ‘there is nothing more to say’ almost appears to allude to the novel itself.<sup>93</sup> By the time an exhausted Paul asks his suffering wife whether she has ‘had enough,’ he might as well be asking the stress-fatigued reader; it has become apparent that the characters’ and the novel’s entire existence is founded on a doomed repetition of an inherited routine.<sup>94</sup> With no escape and no prospect of progression, Homes’ novel appears to be hurtling towards its own expiration.

## II. Failing to Reproduce Normativity

At the same time, however, such metafictional tactics help to place the reader at sufficient critical distance that this portrait of suburban misery is rendered uncanny. Indeed, Homes’ characters are not victims acting out a repressive master narrative that they did not choose, so much as willing participants in their own subjection. In a monstrous exaggeration of 1950s contented housewifery, Elaine reacts to Paul’s denigrations by declaring ‘Don’t fuck with me. [...] You insult me, my cooking. I

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<sup>91</sup> Homes, p.5.

<sup>92</sup> Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism*, p.xxii.

<sup>93</sup> Homes, p.14; p.5.

<sup>94</sup> Homes, p.15.

am my cooking.’<sup>95</sup> Curiously, degrading herself to an icon of domesticity appears to offer comfort, security and an enhanced sense of self. Indeed, Elaine’s gender-stereotypical posture and costume – ‘at the sink, in an apron, in Playtex gloves’ – is revealed to be part of a ‘prophylactic effort’ to both *exclude* an invisible disease lying just beyond the boundaries of her body and *contain* a fragile identity.<sup>96</sup> The act of literally and symbolically tethering herself to the domestic sphere and sealing herself off from the outside world at once provides armour and insulation. Though Elaine might *subsequently* adhere to the notion that suburbanites can only relate to one another through the medium of consumption, this tethering requires constant, exhausting effort and physical isolation. Homes intimates that theirs is not a straightforwardly affective relationship between house and home; the former is neither the source of their happiness nor the progenitor of their despair. As such, the novel confounds Jurca’s neatly dystopian projection. Paul and Elaine might have invested in the house as the object for their lack, but in refusing to naturalise the relationship between house and home, consumer identity and personal identity, Homes draws attention to the slipping points between them.

And it is not just Paul and Elaine who spend their days constructing and clinging to a normative conservatism whilst their lives implode behind closed doors. At a backyard barbecue, Homes evokes a communal identity not shored up by geographical proximity or shared ideological beliefs, but by a fragile symbolic consensus. Characters who ‘believe in putting on [...] a party face’ and who ‘act glad to see each other’ appear fearfully invested in conforming to socio-cultural clichés of the suburbs as hotbeds of homogeneity.<sup>97</sup> In a scene that might have been lifted directly from Keats’ anti-suburban polemic, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1957), men ‘hover around the grill’ like hunters whilst their wives ‘bathe in the cold blue fluorescent light of the kitchen,’ eyeing one another suspiciously in the hope that no-one ‘gives the goods away.’<sup>98</sup> For all the negative connotations of these one-dimensional stereotypes, their ubiquity and coherence seems to provide the only reassuring sense of common inheritance and continuity in an otherwise desolate and

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<sup>95</sup> Homes, p.4.

<sup>96</sup> Homes, p.1.

<sup>97</sup> Homes, p.9.

<sup>98</sup> Homes, p.10.

unconnected landscape of familial dysfunction. As the night ends in a haze of Bloody Marys, inter-marital flirting and the timeless sounds of Frank Sinatra, a guest asks, hopefully, ‘Are we our parents?’<sup>99</sup>

That the characters do not always succeed in recreating the values and practices of their ‘parents’ does not point to an erosion of family, community and place identity in contemporary suburbia. Berlant argues that maintaining the illusion of the good life ‘involves finding resting places; the reproduction of normativity occurs when rest is imagined nostalgically – that is, in the places where rest is supposed to have happened, a fantasy masquerading as screen memory or paramnesia.’<sup>100</sup> In this case, the characters’ enthusiastic evocation of a lost time is no more than nostalgia for a nostalgia, more closely resembling a jumble of tropes from post-war media, early social studies and Cheever’s *self-consciously* fictional portrait of suburbia than to the lived experience of their parents. The fact that Cheever’s protagonists display their own version of nostalgia for their environment distances Homes’ characters from the fantastical object of their desires even further. Indeed, whilst both authors evoke landscapes of imposing housing, deadening commuter routines and unhappy housewives, it is crucial to note that the real Westchester has never entirely resembled this image.<sup>101</sup> This is not an oversight on Cheever’s part, but a conscious decision to evoke suburbia as a real location with a distinct imaginary cartography. In ‘The Swimmer,’ protagonist Neddy proclaims that ‘the only maps and charts he had to go by were remembered or imaginary, but these were clear enough.’<sup>102</sup> His words point to Cheever’s own authorial ambivalence – warning against reading his work as a comment on either the *actual* homogeneity or pastoral innocence of the landscape – and testify to the extraordinary power of the suburban myth. Allowing their habits and pastimes to be influenced by such unreliable imaginative visions, Homes’ characters encase themselves in an anachronistic, fictional paradigm, as though it might protect them from something far more frightening. Their legacy is not generational, but mythological.

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<sup>99</sup> Homes, p.11.

<sup>100</sup> Berlant, ‘Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal,’ p.291.

<sup>101</sup> See Kenneth T. Jackson, ‘Suburban Redux: Westchester County as the American Paradigm,’ *Westchester: The American Suburb*, ed. by Roger Panetta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp.1-4 for a description of Westchester’s architectural diversity, age and atypical development.

<sup>102</sup> Cheever, ‘The Swimmer,’ p.777.

Ultimately, this investment offers only the most meagre respite from a ‘fall between the cracks.’<sup>103</sup> Just as Neddy is eventually confronted with the gap between his pastoral vision and his suburban reality, Homes’ characters are forced into queasy encounters with the fissures from the outset. Indeed, the opening pages contain significant flashes of ironic humour that point to a more complex negotiation of the novel’s symbolic heritage. Chatting to a single woman at a dinner party, Paul is rendered speechless by her claim that he has a ‘below average’ family because he has two rather than ‘two point three children.’<sup>104</sup> That the ‘normative’ nuclear family is not merely an unrealistic idealisation but a statistical impossibility underscores the fact that paradigmatic concepts can never be inhabited without leaving a remainder. Whilst such moments provide light relief for the reader, Homes also invokes a burgeoning violence at the margins between signifier and signified. Keen to ‘play [Paul’s] game,’<sup>105</sup> Elaine mimes cutting her husband whilst taunting him with the words, ‘if I wanted to kill you, I would just go like this,’ only to be horrified to discover that she has actually drawn blood.<sup>106</sup> Her mistake, it seems, is to have lost sight of the fact that she is capable of effecting change in her environment. Having attempted to inhabit a socio-cultural cliché for so long, Elaine has begun to think of herself as fundamentally unreal. Ferdinand de Saussure once described the relationship between signifier and signified, form and concept, as being as ‘inseparable as two sides of a piece of paper.’<sup>107</sup> In *Music for Torching*, Homes implies that the razor thin space between the two might nevertheless cause real damage; for all their attempts to naturalise their performance, Paul and Elaine’s game of make-believe has grown increasingly toxic and unsustainable.

It is arguably the couple’s burgeoning awareness of their failure to fully inhabit the suburban stereotype that makes them so jaded. Elaine’s constant refrain that ‘the house is falling apart. Everything is made of shit’ evokes a loosening of tethers between the house itself and the ‘cluster of desires and affects’ that were once

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<sup>103</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p.180.

<sup>104</sup> Homes, p.2.

<sup>105</sup> Homes, p.5.

<sup>106</sup> Homes, p.4.

<sup>107</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), p.113.

‘magnetised’ to it.<sup>108</sup> Racing from ‘room to room [...] upstairs, downstairs, faster, faster,’ Elaine spends her days desperately trying to restore ‘what is missing, absent, or in need of attention. She makes notes until she feels sick.’<sup>109</sup> Sure that their dream of spiritual fulfilment will never come good, but sensing themselves to be powerless to effect change in their environment, Paul and Elaine find themselves in a relationship of cruel optimism to this disabling object.

One might assume, therefore, that the couple’s decision to set fire to their house rather than sit through another barbecue represents a reasoned and politically empowered refusal of the symbolic. Like the eponymous hero of *The Truman Show*, who eventually exits the suburban stage for the great unknown, their gesture seems destined to reveal the malevolent power of the domestic sphere as flimsy and metaphorical, liberating them to go in search of the *real*. It is a declaration of ‘their awareness, the great and formal announcement: this is not who we are, we are not like you – we have failed.’<sup>110</sup> Using their barbecue – another key suburban motif – to start the fire, they metaphorically turn consumption back on itself and escape with their family intact.

Nevertheless, even as Paul and Elaine affirm their agency, Homes implies that they are not purposefully demythologising their lives in order to connect to their peers in a more substantial way, so much as acting impulsively ‘because there [is] nothing else to do.’<sup>111</sup> Like the knife incident before it, the gesture resembles a childish prank that gets out of hand: ‘wordless, each wonders if it is a game – a dare to see who will run for the garden hose.’<sup>112</sup> Neither has thought about the future in any substantial way; their politically impassioned plea for change amounts to a vague desire to *have* a life, whatever that means.<sup>113</sup> The critic Mary Holland reads ‘the act of burning the house as a wholly irrational and purposeless enactment of the meaningless consumption that this thoroughly bourgeois society encourages.’<sup>114</sup> I would argue,

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<sup>108</sup> Homes, p.2; Lauren Berlant, ‘Cruel Optimism,’ *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, ed. by Elizabeth Weed, Vol. 17, No.5, (Fall 2006), pp.20-36, p.23.

<sup>109</sup> Homes, p.18.

<sup>110</sup> Homes, p.53.

<sup>111</sup> Homes, p.25.

<sup>112</sup> Homes, p.20.

<sup>113</sup> Paul says, ‘I just want to live. Live and not worry. Is that possible?’ p.21.

<sup>114</sup> Holland, p.123.

however, that Paul and Elaine's failure to take responsibility for destroying the house is testament to their earnest belief in its power.

Returning home to inspect the damage, the couple imagine themselves to be careering towards a site of apocalyptic disorder, united – briefly – in their anticipation that the force of their misery has not only 'set the house on fire,' but has 'set the world on fire' too.<sup>115</sup> Paul and Elaine do not imagine *themselves* as God-like agents of justice, but as impotent figures in thrall to a violent, anthropomorphic agent of destruction and salvation; their home. In imagery echoing Revelation 18 – in which the immoral, economically powerful city of Babylon is razed to the ground by a wrathful God – Paul imagines that 'every house will be burning, every tree consumed, the neighbours will be streaming out into the melting, molten streets, their arms thrown into the air beseeching the houses to smite themselves, to simply put themselves out.'<sup>116</sup> In condemning their home as the source of their despair whilst imploring it to rescue them, Paul and Elaine simultaneously refortify the 'symbolic lore of the suburbs to explain away universal human failings' and attempt to drive their own particular misery into the material realm.<sup>117</sup> Once so intangible that they could not even describe it to one another, their fear seems poised to be transformed into a communal – or even global – concern. Far from attempting to raze the property's affective value, they appear to be trying to *reignite* it.

Yet, the house – smoke-damaged, but otherwise unharmed – persists. This is not evidence of the couple's impotency in the face of an inherently powerful monolith. Nor is it proof that an environment with such limited visions of domesticity cannot accommodate alternative models. In seeking to destroy their house and begin again with a neutral space, Homes' childlike characters are arguably motivated by the same desires as Rodney Booth; both are attempting to escape history and pursue the frontier.<sup>118</sup> However, whilst Rodney is propelled forward by his belief in personal advancement over the common good, Paul and Elaine conceive of their aspirations

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<sup>115</sup> Homes, p.26.

<sup>116</sup> Homes, p.26.

<sup>117</sup> Foster, p.64.

<sup>118</sup> Certainly, Elaine's romantic investment in the suburban frontier is hinted at retrospectively: when the house emerges intact, Elaine considers running 'into the woods to live like a wild woman on berries,' thereby realigning her fantasy to accommodate alternative landscapes. Homes, p.28.

and nightmares as universal demands, as though community might only be forged in the pursuit of a common goal. Perhaps, therefore, in refusing a narrative of destruction and regeneration, Homes eschews the Enlightenment sentimentalism so bound up with early suburban development, and insists upon an active renegotiation of America's symbolic inheritance, painful though that may be. At the same time, by suggesting that these paradigms are dialectically perpetuated rather than inexorable, she emphasises the need to take responsibility for their renunciation or propagation.

### **III. A House is Not a Home: Negotiating the Fissure**

Though the surface of the house remains relatively unscathed, leaving Paul and Elaine lamenting that they are 'the same as [they] were yesterday,' Homes' language intimates that everything is not as it was.<sup>119</sup> Curiously, the burning of the house coincides with a breakdown in linguistic clarity: 'I don't think you realise what I'm saying,' says Elaine, before she and Paul galvanise one another 'wordlessly' to topple the barbecue.<sup>120</sup> Meanwhile, their children, who had been asking each other questions via walkie-talkies begin communicating with 'the Morse-code button, talking in an unintelligible language of longs and shorts, dots and dashes.' After the fire, all four are 'oddly silent.'<sup>121</sup> Where language had once signified clearly, it is suddenly, inexplicably, contentious and obfuscating. What has taken place is a disturbance of the symbolic order. On trying, and ultimately failing, to burn their house to change their home, Paul and Elaine not only make visible the fact that they have imbued their house with an ontology, but at once transform it into an object of contention, whose meaning and metaphorical territory must be fought over.

In the days following the fire, the couple's once impenetrable fortress is both physically and semantically evacuated of its contents, transformed from a total interior with an absolute logic into a multi-mediated spatiality. As neighbours come and go through the collapsed dining-room wall, 'bearing the names and numbers of contractors, carpenters and painters,' strangers mill about on the lawn, purchasing items of clothing and furniture to which Paul and Elaine had been sentimentally

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<sup>119</sup> Homes, p.41.

<sup>120</sup> Homes, p.19.

<sup>121</sup> Homes, p.21.

attached.<sup>122</sup> Directly referencing DeLillo's *White Noise* in her evocation of this process as a 'postmodern barn-raising,' Homes implies that this crisis of meaning extends far beyond the ontology of the suburban home and its immediate environs.<sup>123</sup> In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Baudrillard claims that in a society in which consumption has long since supplanted production, and the mass-media has become ubiquitous, the original has been subsumed beneath a variety of images that only loosely denote it, so much so that the image increasingly precedes and undermines the 'real.' In this environment of simulacra, 'the territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it.' Instead, the map 'engenders the territory:' the sign is all that counts.<sup>124</sup> In this instance, Homes appears to be allegorising the process by which 'the effect and affect' of 'home' has become detached from the house and the family that inhabit it, only to be 'reproduced, with even greater success in the commercial sphere.'<sup>125</sup> As with DeLillo's most photographed barn, there is no longer an original, stable reality against which one might recognise the artificial, and, far from acting as a refuge from the pressures of the outside world, the house is revealed as an embodiment of those threats. After helping to transform their front yard into a department store, a woman takes Elaine's jumper and asks, 'What do you think? Is it *me*?'<sup>126</sup>

Berlant writes that what makes 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility' particularly *cruel*, as opposed to merely inconvenient, is the fact that 'the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of [it...], because the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living.'<sup>127</sup> Though they had considered their house as an enervating spatiality, the alternative – that it possesses no inherent value at all – leaves them with no authentic connection to the world whatsoever. On discovering that their SOS has failed, Paul is struck by the uncanny feeling that his home is suddenly 'neither here nor there.'<sup>128</sup> 'In a kind of dislocated fugue, broken

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<sup>122</sup> Homes, p.38.

<sup>123</sup> Homes, p.38.

<sup>124</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.1.

<sup>125</sup> Edmunds, p.414.

<sup>126</sup> Homes, p.36.

<sup>127</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p.24.

<sup>128</sup> Homes, p.27.



off from each other and themselves, the couple wander back and forth, in and out and around the house' like spectres in limbo, mourning the loss of the belief system that had held them in space and time.<sup>129</sup> Worse still, there seems to be nothing outside or beyond the simulacra they have constructed; they 'are trapped in it, entirely engulfed – this is their life.'<sup>130</sup> Having aligned their identities so closely with their house, bestowing it with the power to communicate their needs and anxieties, Paul and Elaine are appalled to discover that 'a house is not a home.'<sup>131</sup>

Thus, the couple's failed apocalyptic endeavour does bring about an 'ending' of sorts. In the 'breeze of something displaced', one can discern the irrevocable shattering of sign and signifier.<sup>132</sup> With no Second Coming of a utopian saviour and no evidence that they are continuous with the world and its changes, Paul and Elaine lose all last vestiges of epistemological certainty and begin to slide into a state of ironic detachment. At this moment, I would argue, the novel extricates itself entirely from Jurca and Beuka's projected narrative of internal coherence and alienation, setting its protagonists adrift in a world in which nothing signifies as it should, and where there are seemingly no consequences for their actions.<sup>133</sup> Even their own skin becomes merely 'another ill-fitting layer, like clothing' that cannot speak of the persona beneath; devoid of 'memory – the landscape of the body hangs loose, shapeless,' like the suburb it inhabits.<sup>134</sup>

Whilst Paul and Elaine experience this destruction of epistemological certainty as deeply traumatic, Homes suggests that accepting that there are no stable, unchanging subjects might create new opportunities for intimacy, symbiosis and even self-definition. According to Julia Kristeva, the best modern literature explores the fragile borderland where conventional paradigms are disturbed and begin to break down, and where linguistic binaries such as self/other, subject/object become fluid. Open, unlocked and with a crumbling fourth wall, Paul and Elaine's suburban home

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<sup>129</sup> Homes, p.34.

<sup>130</sup> Homes, p.53.

<sup>131</sup> Homes, p.43.

<sup>132</sup> Homes, p.86.

<sup>133</sup> Elaine notes that 'it's as though its fine, as though its well and good to burn down the house, fix it, and move back in as though nothing has happened, as though nothing has changed. Something has to change. Someone has to notice.' Homes, p.284.

<sup>134</sup> Homes, p.23.

becomes just such an abject spatiality; it is a structure whose boundaries are constantly being violated and whose interior becomes a site of community exchange. On one hand, a neighbour's declaration, "'Times like these really pull you together! [...] I'd like to buy your melon baller,'" speaks of an artificial intimacy centred solely around consumption.<sup>135</sup> Yet the couple's new acquaintances also offer valuable support. Exhausted, and touched by Mrs. Hansen's help, Elaine momentarily lets her mask slip by confessing that the house burnt down because she 'didn't feel like cooking.'<sup>136</sup> Mrs. Hansen later acknowledges that she and Elaine 'weren't friends at all, until the fire.'<sup>137</sup> Paul, meanwhile, calls his college roommate to seek advice for his mistake. Both are rewarded with a 'dose of connection' that has thus-far remained elusive, and the promise of further intimacy.<sup>138</sup> These interactions suggest that linguistic and cultural uncertainty need *not* automatically result in the eradication of the human – or signified – in the name of the sign; language might unsettle the subject it describes, but it is not inherently destructive of self and feeling. Nor is it unable to represent meaningful affect. This fact remains lost on Paul and Elaine: once the urgency of their need has dissipated, both retreat to a less anxiety-inducing territory where they 'talk without talking, without saying anything.'<sup>139</sup>

Homes does not automatically equate the erosion of monolithic master narratives with the end of history and the onset of a depthless present of inauthentic signs. Discussing her smoke-damaged belongings with her neighbour Pat, Elaine declares that everything is broken, 'everything is history,' and resolves to 'throw away the past, the weight of it,' in favour of living only with what she needs from moment to moment.<sup>140</sup> Pat, on the other hand, is inclined to think that everything can be put back together if you've got the pieces.'<sup>141</sup> Her advice, to be resourceful and pragmatic – discarding objects that no longer serve a purpose and re-examining those that might be useful in the future – advocates precisely the act of bricolage that the novel itself performs on the traumatic residues of the suburban dream. Crucially,

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<sup>135</sup> Homes, p.40.

<sup>136</sup> Homes, p.37.

<sup>137</sup> Homes, p.125.

<sup>138</sup> Homes, p.88.

<sup>139</sup> Homes, p.87.

<sup>140</sup> Homes, p.36.

<sup>141</sup> Homes, p.34.

following the fire, it is apparent that the damage ‘is not global, the house does not need to be razed, but what’s there is there – it’s *real*.’<sup>142</sup> The couple’s actions, whilst not inciting a global apocalypse, have nevertheless *literally* rendered the family homeless and resulted in the children being exiled to stay with friends. That both parents and children find this process disorientating, traumatic and *infantilising* is testament to the fact that physical and emotional shelter are *not* mutually exclusive.

However, Homes’ frequent allusions to infantilisation evoke something more than the couple’s temporary physical displacement and the humiliation it causes them. Following the fire, they find themselves haunting Pat and George’s hallways in too-big pyjamas like ‘children who have been allowed to stay up late.’<sup>143</sup> Partly, this speaks of both the regressive nature of their crime and their reversion to dependents who want for nothing. Yet it is not merely Pat and George who begin to seem like parental figures, but also the house they inhabit. Indeed, Paul and Elaine imagine the spare room in which they are staying as a sort of womb, with vagina-pink walls that ‘glow, pulsing like an organ.’ Meanwhile, the threads on the carpet ‘are like the cilia that line the throat, the ear, the lungs;’ part of a grotesque body that offers temporary shelter.<sup>144</sup> In *The Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva imagines the womb as a ‘semiotic chora,’ in which ‘language, identity, and threats to identity do not yet exist’ and where the subject is ‘as yet un-constituted.’<sup>145</sup> At birth, however, the subject is thrust into a symbolic realm organised by language, and can never return to a pre-linguistic condition. Indeed, to even articulate this desire to return, one must utilise the learned discourse that such a return would refuse. Homes’ imagery signals the couple’s desperation to return to a state of semiotic naivety in a newly uncertain world. As Pat and George’s precocious children take sentry duty outside their room, Paul and Elaine set the tone for a *willing* self-infantilisation that continues throughout the novel, leaving the younger generation with no choice but to step into the roles vacated by their irresponsible parents.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Homes, p.90. My italics.

<sup>143</sup> Homes, p.52.

<sup>144</sup> Homes, p.57.

<sup>145</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University, 1982), p.35, as paraphrased by Kristin Czarnecki, “‘Signs I Don’t Understand:’ Language and Abjection in Molloy,” *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (May 2009), pp. 52-77, p.55.

<sup>146</sup> ‘Did you wet your bed?’ asks their six-year-old son, before reading his mother a bedtime story, p.274.

The fact that it is not an actual mother to whom they retreat, but a symbolic one – the house itself – captures the paradox that Kristeva articulates; one cannot vocalise an actual escape from the symbolic (merely the futile desire for one), since words themselves operate within the symbolic realm. Yet theirs is not a recognition of the fact that language must define, and arguably limit, reality so much as a monstrous confusion of real and symbolic inheritance, in which the ‘real’ that lurks behind the sign is rendered meaningless. Paul and Elaine’s investment in the house as a sort of substitute mother heralds their departure from a world in which biological and social ties are central, and their entrance into a realm of surface and symbol.

Nevertheless, for a time, it appears that Homes’ characters are on the verge of reaching a new understanding about where value truly inheres. The morning after the fire, Elaine notices that Paul’s ‘bald top has a shine, a glow like the dome of a state capitol. She’s seeing something boyish and loveable in [him], something she hasn’t seen in a long time.’<sup>147</sup> United in their shared experience, Paul and Elaine become one another’s metaphorical core in a disorientating, symbolically decentred suburban world. What Homes appears to be gesturing towards is the embrace of a relational horizontal politics that might facilitate the collective rebuilding of the domestic form into a shape that is *actually* inhabitable. Tellingly, their realisation that, whatever their losses, they still have one another, immediately transforms the world around them: ‘the grass is green. The sky is bright. The air cool and fresh [...] It is as though they’ve woken from a dream’ and can suddenly recognise themselves as part of a continuum.<sup>148</sup> Returning to their house, they determine to bring their children home and ‘to try harder’ to keep their family united both physically and emotionally.<sup>149</sup>

And yet, as they get near, ‘they drift. [...] He is going forward. She is falling back. She is running out of air.’<sup>150</sup> For Elaine, it feels as though ‘the house is haunted, it will turn on her. She is expected to take care of it, to nurse it, to love it, to coach it back to health. She hates the house.’<sup>151</sup> Despite all their efforts, their home is still

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<sup>147</sup> Homes, p.61.

<sup>148</sup> Homes, p.101.

<sup>149</sup> Homes, p.101.

<sup>150</sup> Homes, p.63.

<sup>151</sup> Homes, p.63.

rotten with connotations, continuing to convey Elaine's restrictive domestic obligations. What Dara Downey notes of Shirley Jackson's 'gothic' fictions is equally true here: this novel depicts a 'haunting rather than a haunted house, offering a coded commentary on the pernicious effects of domestic ideology upon those who buy into the fairy tale that the single-family dwelling both embodies and perpetuates.'<sup>152</sup> For Elaine – not so much unable as *unwilling* to make this distinction – what remains to be exorcised is not the monolithically symbolic ideology that swirls around the suburban home, but the physical, authentic things that reside within it. Embarrassed to seem like failures in an environment in which the successful presentation of one's property remains 'all there is in the world,' Paul and Elaine determine to renovate their house, a purely aesthetic endeavour that does nothing to identify new modes of living.<sup>153</sup>

Over the following days, Elaine works studiously to separate symbol from thing, physically and semantically evacuating the house of the value it shelters – family, memory, the intangibles of daily routine – altogether. In a bleak scene, Elaine's realisation that 'she has to take responsibility' for her exiled children galvanises a trip to the supermarket to buy cleaning products and 'fresh bandages' for the ailing house that will 'cover everything, making it smooth, easy, nice,' as though the only way forward is to wipe the home of its connotations.<sup>154</sup> Yet, only once the house has been literally divested of its inhabitants does the sign take precedence, meaning becomes impossible, and the void between symbol and reality becomes unnavigable. In physically removing the family from their smoke-damaged home, and prioritising aesthetic renovation over physical re-habitation, Paul and Elaine set in motion a chain of events that *subsequently* literalises Jacques Lacan's conceptualisation of those implications; 'the symbol manifests itself [...] as the murder of the thing.'<sup>155</sup>

#### IV. Letting the Symbol Murder the Thing

Interestingly, Elaine's move to replace social and familial obligations with aesthetic ones is partly inspired by the architect that she employs to restore their home. Whilst

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<sup>152</sup> Dara Downey, 'Not a Refuge Yet: Shirley Jackson's Domestic Hauntings,' *A Companion to the American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp.290-302, p.294.

<sup>153</sup> Homes, p.10.

<sup>154</sup> Homes, p.114.

<sup>155</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1977), p.104.

initially appearing to recognise the chasm between utopian visions and material spaces – demanding, ‘tell me your fantasy, and then we’ll talk reality’ – the architect’s self-promotion to the role of marriage counsellor is an effective satire of Lefebvre’s architect as demiurge.<sup>156</sup> In *The Urban Revolution* (1970), Lefebvre cautions that it is not the architect’s duty to ‘define a new conception of life’ and enable individual transcendence, but rather for new conceptions of living in ‘everyday life’ to invigorate a more dynamic form of architecture.<sup>157</sup> This is not to suggest a one-way relationship between spaces and processes of social becoming: Lefebvre is sensitive to the fact that a social transformation can only take place within a space appropriate to it. Rather, it challenges the notion that history, consciousness and ‘all problems of society’ might be conceived in spatial terms.<sup>158</sup> Discussing soon-to-be-divorced ex-clients, Elaine’s architect laments, ‘I’m so upset about the couple that cancelled. [...] It means we all failed.’<sup>159</sup> His words not only imply that their home improvements might have saved their marriage, but also that their relationship is most certainly doomed without them.

Lefebvre argues that ‘physical space has no “reality” without the energy that is deployed within it’ by inhabitants whose imagination continues to appropriate and change that space.<sup>160</sup> As such, the ideal spatial practices embrace the interdependencies of conceived space – that which is planned out by architects and engineers – and lived space. Far from evoking spaces where the imagination might soar, and new social relations might flourish, the architect’s aggressive upselling of home improvements promotes a retreat from the world into an iron fortress: ‘something else you might want to think of,’ he says, ‘is putting in a safe room [...] I’ve got a great bulletproof door with interior dead bolts. These days you never can tell when you’re going to need to just get away, buy yourself a few minutes of

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<sup>156</sup> Homes, p.208;

<sup>157</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), N.pag., as qtd. by Grégory Busquet, ‘Political Space in the Work of Henri Lefebvre: Ideology and Utopia,’ trans. by Sharon Moren, *Justice Spatiale | Spatial Justice*, No. 5 (December 2012-December 2013) <<http://www.jssj.org>> [Accessed 14 December 2017].

<sup>158</sup> Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, revised 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: The Athlone Press, 2000) as qtd. by Busquet, web.

<sup>159</sup> Homes, p.209.

<sup>160</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Blackwell, 1991), p.13.

calm.’<sup>161</sup> Elaine is so convinced by his words that she rejects her original plan for an outdoor porch – a fitting symbol of a mediating space between the public and private – in favour of locks and deadbolts. Unlike Tower’s protagonists, this decision does not seem to be fuelled by a fear of the imagined criminals and deviants lurking outside, so much as by a desire to trap value within its four walls, as though borders and separation will somehow automatically constitute an ‘inside’ to protect.

As they work to seal the holes through which they can see the grass, the trees and the sky, Elaine and her team denude their house of any remaining vitality. In referring to these renovations as a ‘face-lift’ the architect evokes the house as a sick – or simply ugly – anthropomorphic entity that must be cured aesthetically in order to restore Elaine and her husband to social health.<sup>162</sup> Just as post-war federal policies and programmes defined ‘middle-class status and value around the single-family, privately owned, suburban home’ so too does Elaine’s architect succeed in galvanising her to redefine herself by her property.<sup>163</sup>

Nevertheless, Homes almost immediately problematises this once-naturalised relationship, suggesting that anchoring one’s selfhood in the flimsy, abstracted and historically unmoored spaces of capital does little to assuage fears of being ‘etherized, atom-smashed, blasted out of existence.’<sup>164</sup> Aimlessly wandering the streets in search of a vocation, Elaine stumbles across a partially constructed prefab house that appears to have been dropped from the sky, its ‘two halves [...] parked on the grass beside the school, cracked open, split like an English muffin.’<sup>165</sup> Losing her footing almost instantly – a metaphor for the destabilising effects of substituting memory, history and a genuine interaction with place for its symbolic value – Elaine ‘accidentally slams her hand against the wall [and] it goes straight through. The Sheetrock is like cardboard.’<sup>166</sup> That this highly symbolic experience coincides with the completion of their home improvements and the nadir of Elaine’s wellbeing is telling. In failing to understand the symbiotic relationship between individual agency

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<sup>161</sup> Homes, p.208.

<sup>162</sup> Homes, p.207.

<sup>163</sup> Keith M. Wilhite, *Framing Suburbia: U.S. Literature and the Postwar Suburban Region, 1945-2002* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2007), p.153.

<sup>164</sup> Homes, p.267.

<sup>165</sup> Homes, p.267.

<sup>166</sup> Homes, p.267.

and spatial structuring, Elaine becomes as free-floating and incorporeal as the prefab house, evacuated of significance and transformed into another disingenuous commodity. With no semblance of continuity between her home and the community outside it, Elaine is left feeling as though ‘there is an enormous distance, an unbridgeable electromagnetic force field between [her] and everyone else.’<sup>167</sup> Having assumed that repairing the house will repair herself and her family, Elaine experiences the most traumatic self-alienation when it does not.

To claim, therefore, as Kathy Knapp does, that Paul and Elaine are ‘loathsome beyond redemption’ neglects the prolonged trauma and sadness that both suffer in their *efforts* not to care.<sup>168</sup> In many respects, Homes is kinder to her protagonists than Tower, invoking their retreat not as laziness or personal failing, but as a response to the unbearable pain of frustrated agency in a system that projects precisely the opposite. Their earnest belief in progressive change having been destroyed with the fire, the couple employ irony as a defense against a burgeoning realisation that the discourses of self-empowerment that surround them – “‘You are your own beginning. Every day, every hour, every minute, you start again’” – are forms of domination.<sup>169</sup> They spend their days struggling to rebuild themselves through vulgar levels of consumption, striving ‘to make sense, to find familiar coordinates’ without the destructive, though reassuringly familiar, optimism to which they had once been attached.<sup>170</sup>

Though Berlant uses the term ‘crisis ordinariness’ to invoke these traumatic attachments as irrefutably integral to daily life, she suggests that acknowledging the ubiquity of this experience might eventually enable new forms of solidarity to emerge. In fact, she encourages the cultivation of an ‘ordinary’ politics, ‘committed to politicising the circumstances of everyday life based on satisfying needs of the body that are common to everyone,’ and to inspiring courage to ‘meet the demands of bare survival.’<sup>171</sup> For Homes’ characters, conversely, the panicked realisation that

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<sup>167</sup> Homes, p.124.

<sup>168</sup> Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism*, p.10.

<sup>169</sup> Homes, p.324.

<sup>170</sup> Homes, p.106.

<sup>171</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p.4, as paraphrased by Ali Aslam, *Ordinary Democracy: Sovereignty and Citizenship Beyond the Neoliberal Impasse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp.126-7.



their shared fantasies will never come to fruition merely presages an even more violent retreat. In a rare outpouring that directly prefigures Berlant's evocation of treading water whilst waiting for 'collective relief from the ongoing present,' Elaine confesses to her academic friend Liz that she is 'incredibly, horribly stuck. It's like I'm in a coma and can't wake up. Like I'm under the surface.'<sup>172</sup> Sensing that she is obliged to 'make some big decision, should do some enormous thing' Elaine is paralysed by fear, unable either to stand life or to change it.<sup>173</sup> Instead of blaming and subsequently dispensing with the script that they have been obliged to follow, Homes' characters simply blame themselves for failing to perform it. And if you do not tread water, Homes seems to suggest, you drown. Meanwhile, as her characters struggle and fail to find coherence and continuity in their lives, her novel descends into a series of bleak, non-progressive sketches, the reader set adrift in a world in which there is no 'average' against which to measure Paul and Elaine's decline. Their attempts to adopt irony as a survival strategy, and thereby repeatedly transform presence into absence, proves literally fatal.

Whilst sliding into ironic disaffection allows Paul and Elaine to evade the miseries of pain and selfhood and shirk their responsibilities to their neighbours, it also blocks them from being able to *feel* bonds with their children that may have transcended words. Just as the house eventually does no more than signify signification itself, Elaine eventually ceases to associate herself with the name 'mom' altogether and is no longer able to see in the word the original object she has lost and desires: her family.<sup>174</sup> For the children, this investment is not merely archaic, but actively harmful. Unable to grasp the complex nature of their parents' attachments, and incapable of questioning the concepts of house and home, Sammy and Daniel respond to their parental neglect with a frankness that is illuminating. Indeed, whilst his parents assume that 'home' exists only within the four walls of their house, Sammy is instinctively aware that home is to be affiliated with relationships, and thus declares, 'I want to go home. I want to come where you are.'<sup>175</sup> He is inherently opposed to his parents' territorialism: while Paul and Elaine want the door 'bolted,

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<sup>172</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p.272; Homes, p.214.

<sup>173</sup> Homes, p.226.

<sup>174</sup> Homes, p.268.

<sup>175</sup> Homes, p.151.

chained, [... with] the sofa in front just in case,' as though only rigid separatism guarantees the purity of the familial model, Sammy – an asthmatic who is literally harmed by the dust in the renovated house – desperately wants the door to be open.<sup>176</sup> His cry, 'this is the house that hurt me,' is both touchingly literal and strangely prophetic, suggesting that language is capable of carrying truth and symbolism simultaneously.<sup>177</sup> In fact, despite – or arguably *because* of – their naivety, both Sammy and Daniel offer valuable templates for navigating the novel itself. In his various attempts to trace the root of his parents' fear, Daniel might be aligned with the curious reader, intent on unearthing a singular narrative arc. That his detective work proffers little, leaving him increasingly aware that each finding is 'only a piece of the puzzle,' cautions against searching for a universal meaning that ignores the complex, contradictory nature of human behaviour.<sup>178</sup>

Nevertheless, Daniel's hypervigilance points to an emerging theme in the suburban literature of the 1990s: the child's casting of his/her parents' 'gestures of life-building, reciprocity, and acknowledgment, in the light of suspicion, as zombie forms through which normativity reproduces itself as an unliveable animating desire.'<sup>179</sup> In several novels written during this era, children are portrayed as beginning to rail against this rigid cultural inheritance in naïve, and ultimately self-destructive, ways. In *The Virgin Suicides*, for example, the girls' only sure way of opposing their parents' desires is by committing suicide. Set in an ailing suburb of 1970s Detroit – a city whose auto-industry is already on the decline – their defiance is also implicitly a *refusal* to inherit a world of environmental and socio-economic degradation and an acknowledgement that compound growth forever is impossible and dangerously fictitious. In *Music for Torching*, meanwhile, children commit escalating acts of violence in search of autonomy. Indeed, long before Nate murders his classmate, a boy is reported to have bitten off the fingers of his teacher's writing hand, a deeply symbolic act that bespeaks a desire to 'stop the hand' of those that would perpetuate these myths. Later, Daniel inexplicably casts his own hand in plaster, as though attempting to freeze the tools with which he would write himself

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<sup>176</sup> Homes, p.287; p.270.

<sup>177</sup> Homes, p.268.

<sup>178</sup> Homes, p.185.

<sup>179</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p.181.

into submission. Implicit in these acts is the suggestion that, since language is false and dangerously destructive, the novel can only escape its clutches by self-cannibalising. Unable to move beyond deconstruction, it embodies a shift towards narrative oblivion.

At the same time, one might define the boy's literal cannibalism as a process of abjection, in which the newly severed hand functions as a grotesque Other that is at once unapproachable and intimate, an entity that blurs the boundaries between subject and object, nature and society. For all the characters' attempts to show that 'disconnecting symbol from thing erases human body and human feeling by constructing both as conspicuous absences,' the novel is replete with monstrous, oozing, liminal entities that refuse this neat division.<sup>180</sup> In fact, Paul and Elaine's successful transformation of their home into a hermetically sealed show-room that 'has no smell at all [...] is dead nor living, it is non-existent, without connotations' is accompanied by the *failure* of their own bodies to cover the vagaries beneath.<sup>181</sup> Throughout the novel, Paul can be seen standing in front of mirrors in various states of disguise: in a nightgown that looks like a dress, in a sheet that looks like a nappy, regarding the new tattoo that his younger lover has persuaded him to get. 'He cannot leave himself alone,' he realises. 'He cannot surrender to nature. Everything that you can't see, everything undercover, he will skip, but [...] his exposed dome, he will continue to groom.'<sup>182</sup> It is precisely at the site where Paul attempts to affirm the boundaries of the body that they begin to break down. Instead of functioning as a decorative surface, Paul's tattoo almost immediately begins to ooze pus and sprout hairs, the pain causing him to vomit uncontrollably. It feels as though 'something serious is seeping out of him, something organic and intestinal,' he complains.<sup>183</sup>

Kristeva defines both the expulsion of bodily fluids and the severing of limbs as examples of abjection, arguing they disturb order and identity by existing in the liminal zone between subject and object, operating as both part of the self and separated from it. Whilst Kristeva acknowledges abjection as an often-horrifying experience, she maintains that it is also a crucial one, since it is a fundamental

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<sup>180</sup> Holland, p.26.

<sup>181</sup> Homes, p.204.

<sup>182</sup> Homes, p.255.

<sup>183</sup> Homes, p.177.

process by which the individual excludes the maternal object in order that he or she might construct an autonomous adult identity.<sup>184</sup> Here, the maternal figure that Elaine must exclude is not her own biological mother, from whom she is increasingly physically and socially distant, but her suburban home and the inherited cultural order it symbolises.<sup>185</sup> Paul and Elaine's failure to do so after the fire – exemplified by their conflation and confusion of their own bodily experiences with that of the house – has increasingly tragic effects.<sup>186</sup> Their inability to prioritise human life over aesthetics leads to their desperately unhappy son's cries for help going unheard. When Sammy tries to tell them that he doesn't 'stand a chance at Nate's,' his mother 'looks past him at the hole in the dining room wall – bandaged but still looking like the entrance to a cave.'<sup>187</sup> In refusing to accept that the house can never be assimilated into a total logic again, Elaine inadvertently allows her own son to be abjected in its stead.

Homes' final chapter opens with a confused temporal structure and what appears to be a paradoxical premonition of postmodern contingency: 'the day twists, it turns, it starts in one place and ends in another. Elaine is moving backward and forward simultaneously. This is something Elaine can't control. She doesn't get to choose, to say yes or no.'<sup>188</sup> Returning to their daily routines, Paul and Elaine receive cryptic calls from Sammy's school. Even now, Paul remains fundamentally self-involved and reluctant to accept responsibility for his actions, fantasizing that it is all a game, 'that it's not Sammy at all; it's Elaine and Paul. It's a set-up.'<sup>189</sup> As he concerns himself with how much money it will cost to get him there in a cab, Homes scatters clues that point to the gravity of the situation, creating a sense of dramatic irony despite the reader apparently not knowing what is about to unfold. The driver of Paul's cab, for example, functions as something of a Shakespearean fool, declaring, "'People always want what they don't have. [...] Why is that? Why aren't they ever satisfied? Human nature?'"<sup>190</sup> Homes' vocabulary, meanwhile, unsettles the reader

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<sup>184</sup> See Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, pp.1-5.

<sup>185</sup> Though Elaine is portrayed as being particularly childish and needy for most of the novel, she comes to understand that, since her own mother 'act[s] like the child,' she will not receive the nurture she craves from a biological source. Homes, p.261.

<sup>186</sup> They refer to their own bodies as landscapes and describe the tarpaulin on the house as skin, p.23.

<sup>187</sup> Homes, p.126.

<sup>188</sup> Homes, p.334.

<sup>189</sup> Homes, p.331.

<sup>190</sup> Homes, p.332.

in its eccentricity: the morning of the tragedy is referred to as ‘shiny’ and blindly bright; Sammy is frightened by the sharp trill of the alarm clock; and Daniel inexplicably asserts that ‘the theme for the day is excretion.’<sup>191</sup> When the threat is finally revealed – that their neighbour’s nine-year-old son is armed and has imprisoned Sammy in the cloakroom – it is an unprecedented shock that is somehow entirely expected: the shiny morning prefiguring the metallic blade of the incoming police helicopter, the alarm clock a premonition of the school fire alarm as the children evacuate, the theme of excretion rendered horrifyingly literal by Sammy’s gaping head wound.

By the time a gun-toting Nate yells ‘I’ll show you what history is,’ it has become horrifyingly clear that the novel’s denouement is anything but an expression of postmodern contingency.<sup>192</sup> Rather, the warning signs have peppered the novel throughout, and for failing to acknowledge them, the reader is just as culpable as the characters. In fact, Elaine’s behaviour in the final chapter arguably mirrors the reader’s experience of navigating the novel itself: drawn to the surface even as she is warned of the severity of the situation, Elaine cannot make the words ‘add up’ to something, and repeatedly allows herself to be distracted by thoughts of movies and media images that bear a similarity to the present moment.<sup>193</sup> Only when Sammy’s teachers seize Elaine by the shoulders, their voices ‘flattened by the facts,’ does it dawn on both her and the reader that there has been a narrative arc all along, and that all the signs that she chose to ignore do in fact signify.<sup>194</sup> Belatedly recognising the relational spatial politics that Homes subtly evokes throughout, Elaine finally understands that her and her children’s lives, their surroundings and their community, were always connected; ‘Sammy and Daniel in the backyard, the grass, the garden, the roots of trees, dirt in the Dumpster [...] What are you wearing? Red socks.’<sup>195</sup> With horror, she remembers that Sammy has been trying and failing to articulate this threat all along; with words, with gestures, with ‘coded communication.’<sup>196</sup> Meanwhile, the reader, forced back over the narrative in search

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<sup>191</sup> Homes, p.309.

<sup>192</sup> Homes, p.337.

<sup>193</sup> Homes, p.338.

<sup>194</sup> Homes, p.340.

<sup>195</sup> Homes, p.340.

<sup>196</sup> Homes, p.270.

of the thread that led to this final, cataclysmic event realises that every chapter contains just such a coded warning: Sammy's love of *Bambi* – a film that Daniel calls 'waiting to be roadkill;' games of hostage; Nate dressed in camouflage gear, shooting Sammy in the school play; allusions to Sammy as 'sweet, almost fragile.'<sup>197</sup>

Holland reads in the denouement of *Music for Torching* something of a self-conscious failure to recuperate individual or familial identity and an affective relationship with place from *within* a culture of irony, simulation and linguistic crisis. Instead of negotiating an 'intimacy between familial and linguistic matters,' Holland argues that Homes 'caps the sprawl of loosely related quotidian events' and suburban angst, and 'retreats to pre-postmodern techniques that ignore the problem of language,' saving her characters by reinserting them into a less fraught, clearly readable suburban symbolism.<sup>198</sup> In doing so, Homes apparently places her 'very limited hope for the future of the literary family in encouraging signs that a critical interest' in the form of social realism embraced by 'Bellow, Roth and Updike' might be returning. In Holland's argument, the sacrifice of Sammy serves as both a punishment for the characters and a justification for their 'vague sense of domestic dread,' restoring a linear logic of cause and effect to a narrative that had seemed to proceed without aim. At the same time, it acts as a perverse reassurance for the reader, creating an old-fashioned universality of meaning, and redeeming the suburban landscape from meaninglessness. It is, Holland claims, a 'move backward to the comfortable assurances of traditional realism in order to move forward out of anti-humanism.'<sup>199</sup>

I would argue that Homes does not figure this apparent return as an appropriate substitute to postmodern contingency, but rather decries it as a monstrous non-alternative, equally degenerative. Indeed, whilst Paul and Elaine might be 'rewarded' with the epistemological certainty that they have been seeking throughout, it comes at the price of the next generation. As Elaine watches Nate shoot Sammy on the screen, she stands 'with her fingers pressed to her mouth, afraid it's all going to fall

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<sup>197</sup> Homes, p.231.

<sup>198</sup> Holland, p.10.

<sup>199</sup> Holland, p.7.

out, endlessly spew. All she can do is push it back, push it down, swallow it.<sup>200</sup> Unwilling to renounce their suburban cultural inheritance by metaphorically abjecting the house, Paul and Elaine have permanently cast out their own son. Too young to understand the simulated reality in which their parents live, Sammy and Daniel are the unintentional soothsayers who arguably bring Paul and Elaine too close to the frontier of their condition as living beings and must be destroyed. Throughout the novel, Homes implies that the couple exile their children because they make them feel uncomfortable, reminding them of the inadequacy of their own investment. As the paramedics rush to save Sammy, one asks, 'Did they find the eye?'<sup>201</sup> It is a visceral evocation of the horrifying nature of his injuries that simultaneously calls to mind the 'I' of secure ontology. That the eye remains lost implies that the next generation is being erased both physically and semantically. Far from invoking a closed sign-thing relationship, therefore, this return to the 'real' is destructive of both language and life. Sammy's death becomes a crisis in the kinds of knowledge that will reign.

Sammy's never becoming intelligible arguably points to a *refusal* to subjugate the next generation into being the desiring machines that their parents are. That Paul and Elaine's investment in the suburban stereotype causes their two sons varying degrees of emotional and physical distress, certainly appears to suggest the trauma and sacrifice involved in labouring for a univocal future. In fact, Homes codes patriarchal master narratives in terms of repression, corruption, and disease throughout, whilst emphasising the problematic, deeply ambivalent relationship that all the characters have with their parents. However, despite implying that diseased ideologies are transmitted through linear, generational channels and are destructive to horizontal relationships, Homes does not follow Lee Edelman to suggest that embracing *any* construction of reality beyond the perpetual present means ceding to a system of control designed to crush individual needs and desires.<sup>202</sup> Indeed, it is only when the couple rejects master narratives altogether and embraces a radical negativity that imagines *nothing* worthwhile beyond the present moment, that their children suffer.

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<sup>200</sup> Homes, p.345.

<sup>201</sup> Homes, p.354.

<sup>202</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p.12.

Similarly, though critical of Paul and Elaine's passivity and inability to make decisions, Homes appears equally cognisant of the costs of putting one's own body on the line to effect change. In exchanging irony for earnestness, Nate's fundamentalist behaviour embodies placing too much emphasis on shaping history through 'personal, risk-taking involvement and direct action, rather than on communally instituting new social and political structures that would create a more democratic society.'<sup>203</sup>

In fact, Nate's crime is less a radical denial of his socio-cultural inheritance than a confused and ultimately tragic attempt to protect his home as *both* an empty simulacrum and as an affective space to which he is emotionally attached. On the cusp of adolescence, caught in the space between the two, he is unable to inhabit either model without leaving a remainder. In the final pages, Nate refuses his mother's pleas to come home, declaring, 'I'm not going home [...] no-one is going home,' before shooting Sammy in the school cloakroom for failing to 'get out of [his] house.'<sup>204</sup> His words invoke a man protecting his property – clumsily, confusedly, because he has no suitable model for doing so – from the friend who stayed at his house and from the man who conducted an affair with his mother. That his final action before shooting Sammy is to drop the blinds on his metaphorical 'house' seems to point to his attempted self-enclosure in the total interior of symbolism; he embraces an affective solidity in the structure of the family home because his parents are incapable of providing that solidity through nurture. That his act is so destructive highlights just 'how much aggression is involved in lining up life with fantasy.'<sup>205</sup>

## **V. The Limited Utopia and the Novel Alternative**

It would be a mistake to conclude that Homes posits nothing in the way of an alternative to the binaries of revolutionary action borne of estrangement, and inertia borne of an inability to mobilise behind desires not dictated by the social order. In the penultimate chapter, Paul and Elaine's childish self-interest begins to give way to humility, and their nihilism to an acceptance of continuity and contingency. Elaine,

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<sup>203</sup> DeKoven, p.124.

<sup>204</sup> Homes, p.351.

<sup>205</sup> Berlant, 'Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal,' p.277.



brought so low by her self-imposed incarceration in the house that she is contemplating suicide, thrusts herself into the outside world only to find that her primal cry for help is echoed back from all around her. Revisiting the site of the split prefab house, she discovers that her vandalism has been elaborated upon: her 'FUCK THIS' now reads 'FUCK THIS WHOLE FUCKING THING'. And someone has woven string, a deep-red yarn, around the nails connecting the dots.'<sup>206</sup> Whilst the perpetrators remain nameless and unseen, Elaine imagines the work as emanating from 'Allied hands,' and takes some comfort in the idea that her writing has reached across the generations to 'a conclave' of similarly dissatisfied 'youth on the loose.'<sup>207</sup> This seems a cautious optimism that language might still suture a community of readers, even in a postmodern landscape in which signifiers are so frequently devoid of context and are mediated by capitalist endeavors. Similarly, reassured by her guidance counsellor that she is a people person, Elaine notices that nurture and support might inhere just as powerfully in horizontal relationships as in familial ones, and in turning away from her hampering mother and towards her neighbours for support, she is prompted to 'wonder why everything seems catastrophic, why she's always holding her breath, waiting for something to change her life.'<sup>208</sup>

Yet it is in physically repopulating their empty home with their friends, relations and children that the Weisses find a semblance of the intimacy that they had craved. When Elaine's bickering parents visit, she notices a surprising tenderness between them that she, in her self-imposed isolation, had missed. Later, getting undressed next to Elaine, Paul is struck by the pleasure that is to be derived from these 'moments of intimacy, of familiarity.'<sup>209</sup> These instances of shared feeling negate the word-thing disconnect because they transcend language altogether, suggesting that 'home' is neither simply bricks and mortar nor a discursive construct, but a space made and remade by the people moving within it. Homes does not seem to locate the potential to ward off nihilism and find low-key contentment in grand master narratives that seek to order the universe, but in local commitments and mutual

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<sup>206</sup> Homes, p.298.

<sup>207</sup> Homes, p.298.

<sup>208</sup> Homes, p.298.

<sup>209</sup> Homes, p.255.

openness. As friends and their children arrive for a surprise party, Paul and Elaine feel a fleeting sense of proximity and reciprocity that they can at last grasp in its immediacy, sensing ‘the warmth, the heat, the flicker [...] they are all so glad to be back together again.’<sup>210</sup> Sitting in the front yard, the friends look to the stars – as though finally looking beyond the horizontality of signs – and are rewarded with a vista that is ‘bigger than they are, and it is calming and they are quiet.’<sup>211</sup>

For Homes, this newfound neighbourliness represents neither a colossal epistemological breakthrough nor an entirely fresh start. In fact, in her portrayal of the earnest and precocious teenage boy who praises the couple for ‘inverting the phenomenon of the backyard, playing the interiority of the back against the exteriority of the front – substituting private space for public, not worrying who might see’ Homes satirises the reader’s inclination to over-intellectualise their actions.<sup>212</sup> Certainly, the characters themselves are not capable of this objectivity, and Paul admits to himself that he still hates most of his neighbours. Rather, it is a moment of muted optimism, humility and humanity redeemed from within a culture of individualism, in which the characters acknowledge, ‘We all have so many damned opinions, so much we think we know. We don’t know anything.’<sup>213</sup> And neither does the reader: ‘none are what they seem, none are what you think, none are what you’d want them to be,’ Homes stresses. ‘They are all both more and less – deeply human.’<sup>214</sup> As well as emphasising that all knowledge is provisional and uncertain, Homes’ words evoke a non-essentializing vision of suburban experience that admits fallibility, both on the part of the characters and the author. And, although she offers no alternatives or agendas, she does invoke relations of reciprocity as a potential salve for uncertainty.

The new barbecue that they are presented with encapsulates precisely this ambiguity; at once symbolising a new beginning and the opportunity for further cycles of destruction, standing in for both the Weisses’ firmer grasp on reality and their desire

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<sup>210</sup> Homes, p.308.

<sup>211</sup> Homes, p.311.

<sup>212</sup> Homes, p.307.

<sup>213</sup> Homes, p.308.

<sup>214</sup> Homes, p.308.

to retreat to cliché.<sup>215</sup> Ultimately, in its ambiguity, the scene itself appears to gesture towards the need for ongoing oscillations – between humanism and postmodernism, realism and symbolism, historical causality and spatial contingency – in fictional representations of suburban experience. On one hand, Homes implies that the characters' actions are both literally and metaphorically mediated by mass cultural images; pulling the TV close to the window so that 'outside, images flicker across the bushes,' the friends are inclined to feel like they're 'in a movie.'<sup>216</sup> That this environment is not obstructive to communication speaks of the possibility of making oneself at home within the chaos of mediation. Lighting sparklers in the night air, the characters are themselves transformed into 'sweet explosions, firing the night, evaporating in the air.'<sup>217</sup> At the same time, Elaine's decision to purchase alarm clocks to keep her family 'in time' is a gesture that bespeaks a burgeoning understanding of herself as part of a historical continuum, and an acceptance that she will continue to reside in this place over time. Indeed, by acknowledging linear causality – the fact that they 'started the fire that burst the bubble that burned the house and so on and so forth' – Elaine is not only able to take responsibility for her previous actions, but is newly empowered to make changes in the future as well.<sup>218</sup> She is not entirely at the mercy of contingency, but rather 'has some control.'<sup>219</sup> Moreover, in simultaneously accepting spatial violations into her home and moving beyond its confines, Elaine gains a fleeting sense of inhabiting the present.<sup>220</sup> Though, ultimately, Homes is not willing to bring this vision of a 'redemptive return' to fruition, opting instead for a bleak concluding tableau in which Paul and Elaine cling to one another in fear and uncertainty, these tiny instances of humanity amid social ruin offer a semblance of hope in the not-yet-imagined.

In the end, it is possible to surmise why Homes remains circumspect when it comes to defining suburbia's futurity. Three weeks after the publication of *Music for*

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<sup>215</sup> As Holland notes, the gift is a 'real' barbecue, which 'seems to acknowledge the flimsiness of their hold on suburban life until now,' Holland, p.123. Nevertheless, once again, 'the men hover around the grill,' Homes, p.306.

<sup>216</sup> Homes, p.307.

<sup>217</sup> Homes, p.311.

<sup>218</sup> Homes, p.318.

<sup>219</sup> Homes, p.314.

<sup>220</sup> Admitting to herself that when she feels down, 'she must do something different, anything, [...] as long as it's active,' Elaine leaves the house to find that 'the world opens in front of her', p.314.

*Torching*, on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1999, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris marched into a high school in an unincorporated suburb of Jefferson County and murdered twelve students and a teacher. In the aftermath of the Columbine Massacre, as the media conducted a frantic search for the origins of this horrifying violence, critics proclaimed Homes' novel to be strangely prophetic: part of an unheeded lineage of warning signs about the violence latent in the suburbs.<sup>221</sup> The implication was not merely that the massacre had been rendered inevitable long before it happened, but that it could somehow be recuperated as a symbol, capable of offering a valuable message to both the immediate community and America as a whole.

It is precisely this univocal narrativizing of history that Homes' conclusion warns against. Within minutes of Sammy being taken hostage, the quiet suburb is swamped with profit-hungry reporters committed to transforming a horrifying tragedy into sensationalistic 'snack food' for the masses.<sup>222</sup> In this hypermediated environment, in which Sammy's death is played out on a screen, it is almost impossible to distinguish the real from the symbolic, and Elaine struggles to connect to an event that 'look[s] as though it's being transmitted from thousands of miles away.'<sup>223</sup> Nevertheless, to claim that Homes envisions mediated, consumerist society as *necessarily* corrosive to familial relationships would be similarly reductive. Rather, in terminating the narrative at the point when the media descends – thereby refusing to engage these reductive analyses or to offer her own – Homes avoids subsuming the killing into an apocalyptic narrative of crisis and renewal. She does not, however, dispense with the novel's social role entirely. In *Gothic Realities: The Impact of Horror Fiction on Modern Culture* (2006), Andrew L. Cooper argues that events like Columbine should be thought of as 'stories to be told, rather than effects to be traced back to causes,' in order to 'allow room for multiple interpretations.'<sup>224</sup> Within the world of the novel, Nate's crime is not entirely random – both he and Sammy are victims of parental neglect and reluctant witnesses to adultery, his father is a gun-owner, his

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<sup>221</sup> Patrick O'Donnell describes *Music for Torching* as part of 'a catastrophic fatality that has become all too ordinary in the order of things.' O'Donnell, *The American Novel Now: Reading Contemporary American Fiction Since 1980* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p.184.

<sup>222</sup> Homes, p.347.

<sup>223</sup> Homes, p.349.

<sup>224</sup> Andrew L. Cooper, *Gothic Realities: The Impact of Horror Fiction on Modern Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2006), p.171.

victim breathtakingly incapable of self-defence – yet it cannot be traced to a single root cause, and is not easily theorised.

Throughout the novel, Homes hints at a disdain for the semiotic naivety that has encased and restricted suburbia, and warns against a paranoid academic reading that would seek to transform singular cases into entirely symbolic events. Speaking to her academic friend Liz, Elaine voices concern about being used for her case study, ‘The Burning House,’ which will endeavour to find a limited sociocultural explanation for what happened, ‘revealing the truth of Elaine, not as a person but a phenomenon.’<sup>225</sup> The fact that Elaine’s knowledge of the case study dissuades her from making contrary choices and changes serves as a valuable warning against pathologising the characters or their suburban setting. Just as Daniel’s detective work is futile because it isolates artefacts belonging to his parents – lipstick, empty packaging, a glove – and expects them to divulge the reality of their lives, so too are the reader’s attempts to unpack the novel to reveal an essential truth about the characters, their suburban setting, or the death of their son. In what appears to be playful advice for navigating the novel, Homes declares that ‘everything means something, and then it also means something else.’<sup>226</sup> Nevertheless, in paying attention to ‘all that comes through as disturbance, tension, blockage, emotional trouble,’ Homes faces the ‘major changes in the relation between the signifier and the signified, whether in literary language or conventions,’ head on.<sup>227</sup>

Ultimately, it is the novel’s form that offers something of a radical alternative to the binary restrictions that continue to encase suburbia’s discursive landscape. Jameson claims that realism is impossible when the subject under late capitalism is so fragmented as to be entirely unable to form a unified vision of the world. In his search for radical strategies that might break through the monadic isolation of the postmodern age and truly capture the present moment, Jameson engages the work of Proust, praising his ‘retrospective fiction of memory and rewriting after the fact’ for enabling ‘the intensity of a now merely remembered present to be experienced in

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<sup>225</sup> Homes, p.117.

<sup>226</sup> Homes, p.73.

<sup>227</sup> Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: Verso, 1981), p.168.

some time-released and utterly unexpected posthumous actuality.<sup>228</sup> In *Music for Torching*, Homes goes some way towards achieving this feat. Ambiguously revealed on the dedication page to be written entirely ‘In Memory’ – a dedication whose significance becomes apparent retrospectively – and yet written largely in the present tense, the novel is experienced as at once remembered (or predetermined) and evolving. In this way, Homes avoids tethering the past to a specific image in time and space, and succeeds in bringing more elusive or obscured histories to light.

What is revealed, albeit in hindsight, is that the space for affect coexisted within this inauthentic world of signs all along. In actively encouraging a second, retrospective reading of this present history, memories and symbols barely discerned on a first reading take on a new resonance in the second. Paul and Elaine may not be able to see beyond the logic of signs and inherited symbols, but the engaged reader, forced to acknowledge the ease with which they too might have succumbed to the temptation to gridlock suburban fiction according to mediated expectations, is not permitted to succumb to the same fate. Re-reading the novel with their ‘eyes open,’ Homes’ readers are brought together in a *textual* community with a shared accountability for producing the fictional suburban landscape. Ultimately, far from depicting the failure of language, the novel uses parody, pastiche, metafictional tactics and critical distance to demand that we acknowledge the ways in which the past is constructed, whilst embracing the revolutionary plasticity of the fictional form. Further, in redirecting readers’ attention to the past, the novel reveals the forms of social forgetting which are central to a market logic that encourages the relentless pursuit of an impossible future.

Though it might be absurd to think that language can ever fully encapsulate what it means to be human, Homes refuses to abject narrative altogether; there is still a connection between sign and signifier. In fact, it is language itself that emerges as the ultimate threat to – and potential salvation for – the family. Throughout the novel, Homes’ characters imagine physical assaults in textual terms; explosions are flying words, the wrecking ball that hits their house is ‘percussion, punctuation,

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<sup>228</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p.287.

punch line.’<sup>229</sup> Whilst drawing attention to the postmodern crisis of signification, this also acts as a reminder that the novel itself is made of a discourse that endures long after the characters have expired. At the same time, language is presented as a suturing, life-giving force, bringing Elaine’s academic friend great comfort, and offering Elaine a means of reaching beyond her immediate circle.<sup>230</sup> As Mary Holland concedes, the novel may not offer ‘a *return* to liberal humanism (with its assumption of the unified subject or universality of meaning)’ but it goes some way towards salvaging ‘much-missed portions of humanism, such as affect, meaning, and investment in the real world and in relationships between people, while holding on to postmodern ideas about how language and representation function and characterise our human experiences of this world.’<sup>231</sup> It is in depicting the monstrous effects of substituting one for the other, whilst inhabiting the liminal space between the two, that *Music for Torching* begins to tug at suburban fiction’s seams.

## Conclusion

In a 2010 book, Kristin J. Jacobson coins the term Neodomestic to refer to ‘a spatial rather than an exclusively plot- or character-based’ framework with which to analyse fiction. Identifying the emergence of ‘queer, recycled, and unstable domestic territories’ in 1990s fiction, Jacobson insists that such works do ‘not represent a radical break but rather a recycling and reordering of domestic tropes, practices, and spaces’ as a means of remembering suppressed pasts and traumas and constructing a different route to ideas of home and nationhood.<sup>232</sup> Written during a decade of immense environmental, political and social brittleness, Homes and Tower’s apparently insular worlds are in fact saturated with disturbing images of fragmentation, abrasion and penetration, as well as openings, explosions and abject expulsion. These visceral acts of disintegration, permeation and exchange – taking place between public and private, city and suburb, self and other – may frequently torment the novels’ protagonists, but should not be viewed simply as expressions of the inevitability of physical and ethical entropy. Rather, their presence attests to a cautious act of deconstruction; an attempt to explode master narratives and loosen

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<sup>229</sup> Homes, p.254.

<sup>230</sup> Elaine feels less alone when she sees that her graffiti scrawl has generated a sympathetic response, p.298.

<sup>231</sup> Holland, p.8.

<sup>232</sup> Kristin J. Jacobson, *Neodomestic American Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), p.3.

identities that have become fixed in the socio-political imagination, without succumbing to the temptation to proffer new prescriptions for living in a chaotic and contingent world. Refusing contained narratives even as their characters wallow in stasis and are discursively frozen on the page, Homes and Tower transform the realm of the 'ordinary' suburb into a 'zone of convergence of many histories; a mediated landscape in which people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine.'<sup>233</sup>

Thus, whilst challenging both utopian and dystopian representations of suburbia, Homes and Tower do not offer an unmediated account or absolute truth to replace them. Arguably, this is because they recognise that fiction will always be, to an extent, complicit with 'the given of global, multinational, corporate consumer capitalism,' incapable of locating itself outside the 'existing social, political, psychic configuration' and unable to enact, 'either politically or aesthetically, what Marcuse calls the Great Refusal.'<sup>234</sup> And yet, by adopting certain distancing strategies, such as irony, they go some way towards successfully resisting and displacing those configurations from within. Transformed into 'a self-consuming text, one that narrates the desired abolition of the very conditions of its own emergence,' Homes' text in particular 'defiantly holds open in the conditions of dimmest radical political possibility – as in the years of the global neoliberal onslaught – precisely the hope that such a politics might re-emerge.'<sup>235</sup>

Nevertheless, positing an *imaginative* 'opting out' of ideological imperatives arguably does little to address material struggles on the ground; a dilemma which I speculated at the outset *may* have been one that Homes wished to foreground in the novel's title. By resisting a singular reading and attending to the excesses and variabilities of language, the novel induces a certain, valuable historical instability, challenging the self-evident categories by which we organise our knowledge. Yet it also removes the opportunity for real-world correspondences; such fluidity can exist in the novel alone. At the level of plot, the characters never get close to defining

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<sup>233</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p.10.

<sup>234</sup> DeKoven, pp.15-16.

<sup>235</sup> Philip E. Wegner, *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: US Culture in the Long Nineties* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p.119.



another, practicable way of living. Though Homes and Tower make an extraordinary case for moving away from linear suburban narratives of possessive individualism and progress at all costs, the question remains as to how one might anchor an intellectual act of deconstruction in affirmative real-world practices. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Paul Gilroy compares social realism and experimental fiction, and asks whether the latter might justifiably be considered conceited for separating itself off ‘into an autonomous realm where familiar political rules cannot be applied.’<sup>236</sup> I would argue, as Gilroy subsequently does, that reflexive art does not negate the possibility of taking a political position, but rather ‘refuses the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics,’ theory and practice, and recognises its own power to produce real effects, acting as a ‘means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation,’ however vehemently anti-essentialist its questioning.<sup>237</sup>

Yet the problem of privilege remains. In many ways, Paul and Elaine’s desperate attempts to blockade *in* what frightens them about themselves – their intrinsic, unavoidable Otherness to social dictates – is directly linked to the compulsion to cast out those perceived to be abject and alien through the defensive building of gates and walls; both can be explained, in part, as a fear of the difference within themselves, and a fantasy of impermeability. In rhetoric evocative of Hutcheon’s call for ex-centricity, Kristeva contends that it is only once we find the ‘courage to call ourselves disintegrated’ that we might welcome external bodies ‘to that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is ours,’ and embrace ‘a paradoxical community’ of others.<sup>238</sup> Put simply, only once we accept the irreducible difference within ourselves might we embrace difference within society. Such a claim shatters the easy distinction between interiority and exteriority upon which so many of the problems addressed in this chapter are founded. Yet it also implies that a rigorous probing of the ways in which alterity constitutes and is constituted by one’s own subjective experience is an essential ethical precursor to forging less exclusivist relationships with others.

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<sup>236</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 2002), p.38.

<sup>237</sup> Gilroy, p.40.

<sup>238</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p.192.

Crucially, Kristeva's advocacy of lengthy self-analysis, and Berlant's counsel to use the space created by the impasse to experiment with new ways of living and imagining intimacy, appear not to account for the fact that introspection remains a special privilege only a select few can indulge. As Anna Hartnell notes, 'the rejection of all identity politics and programmatic political agendas is the luxury of those who do not need to involve themselves in messy political struggles.'<sup>239</sup> One of the films addressed in the final chapter of this project – *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2014) – could be read as a parody of this privilege, evoking white vampiric aesthetes with literally 'infinite' time to explore and get lost in their ideas, free from any obligation of labour or systematic injustice. The characters' attempts to find salvation from 'crisis ordinariness' in art is depicted as the antithesis of a collective political turn: it is a private endeavour of hoarding that remains, ironically enough, bound-up with notions of locating subject-hood and citizenship in acts of consumption.<sup>240</sup> In the following chapter, I turn to two experimental texts – Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and Danielle Dutton's *SPRAWL* (2010) – that endeavour, through very different means and with varying degrees of success, to balance literary tactics of fragmentation and pastiche with humanist endeavours to locate individual subjectivity *and* collective vantage points.

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<sup>239</sup> Anna Hartnell, *After Katrina: Race, Neoliberalism and the End of the American Century* (New York: SUNY Press, 2017), p.22.

<sup>240</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p.4.

### 3. De- and Re-Territorialisation: Considering a Poetics of Sprawl

Thus far, this thesis has spotlighted fictions that seek to untether the suburbs from their connections to American exceptionalist discourse, with the previous chapter attending to the deconstructive possibilities of language often missed by literary critics in their analyses of suburban fiction. Having invoked the categories assigned by social, political and cultural commentators as generative of actual violence, alienation and spatial repression on the ground, it is perhaps unsurprising that these fictions opt out of replacing deconstruction with a practicable solution.<sup>1</sup> Instead, whilst the characters remain trapped between two monstrous non-alternatives – the impossible desire to manifest a suburban utopia, and the deep detachment of irony – the texts themselves traverse the dichotomies, playing with form to such an extent that they cannot be universalised or flattened. In this chapter, I turn to two novels that use the shifting suburbs to renegotiate the relationship between the local, national and global, and gesture towards more fluid ways of being and belonging in both form *and* content, theory and practice. I also consider the relative successes, failures and ethical implications of their endeavours.

Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and Danielle Dutton's *SPRAWL* (2010) engage discourses about the substance and meaning of 'sprawl' far more transparently than the novels discussed previously. In the first, diverse characters navigate the strip-malls, super-highways and endless, low-density landscapes of Los Angeles, a city long theorised as the prototype for urban change, and imagined as the 'personification of placeless anonymity' by novelists, filmmakers and cultural commentators alike.<sup>2</sup> In the latter, a nameless narrator traipses through an unidentified, apparently interchangeable environment, desperately seeking imaginative solace and a modicum of the suburban stability that her fictional predecessors had found stultifying. To an extent, both not only reflect but also embody excess, their dislocated, decentred narrative structures replete with quick and shallow associations. In a table of contents at the start of *Tropic of Orange*,

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<sup>1</sup> In Chapters one and two, I examined the various processes of socio-political fission and fusion that hastened the rise of fiercely territorial communities, and considered the potentially disastrous effects of promoting an image of homogeneity of needs and aspirations to individuals who feel forced to participate in processes from which they are disenfranchised.

<sup>2</sup> Deyan Sudjic, *The Language of Cities* (London: Penguin, 2017), p.182.

Yamashita offers several ways of reading her novel: linearly – from chapter 1-49 – or hyper-contextually – by character or location. Similarly disorientating, though for entirely different reasons, Dutton’s novel is presented as one uninterrupted paragraph that carries the reader along on a tide of disposable commodities, phrases lifted wholesale from revered modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein nudging alongside shopping lists, advertising slogans and wry commentary about the narrator’s sex life. Jameson conceptualises such an amalgamation of styles and sources as an act of deconsecration, deploring the fact that, ‘in the postmodern moment, cultural artefacts previously endowed [...] with a priestly authority’ are forced to compete with the ‘array of masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a new global culture.’<sup>3</sup> Appraised in this way, Dutton and Yamashita’s novels emerge as wanton celebrations of commercial culture and market imperatives.

Yet these novels are not simply fictions of excess, or stories that challenge the ‘concept upon which we judge order and coherence’ through structural pyrotechnics and word-play alone.<sup>4</sup> Nor are their communicative possibilities side-lined by their aesthetic qualities. This chapter employs Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s term ‘deterritorialisation’ to invoke not only the dissolution of material boundaries associated with sprawl, but also the novels’ attempted destabilisation of various ghettoised thought processes.<sup>5</sup> However, it does so with an awareness of the ambiguities associated with the term. Broadly speaking, deterritorialisation takes place when a set of habits or binary relations is unsettled or decontextualised, creating a radical openness and polyphony. In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), it registers the effects of a turbulent capitalist system that fragments human subjectivity by producing endless contradictory desires. Though almost always accompanied by reterritorialisation – the re-emergence of oppressive capitalist codifications that restrain, co-opt or symbolically ‘house’ these desires – deterritorialisation temporarily disrupts conventional hierarchies, rigid authorities

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<sup>3</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p.18, as paraphrased by Andrew Dix, Brian Jarvis and Paul Jenner, *The Contemporary American Novel in Context* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.91.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p.57.

<sup>5</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Continuum, 2004), and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 2004). The word denotes the movement, whether literal or symbolic, by which one leaves a territory.

and rational approaches to knowledge.<sup>6</sup> It also uncovers myriad new connections between peoples and systems of meaning. More recently, and more ambivalently, theorists have adopted the term to refer to weakening ties between culture and place in an increasingly globalised world, in which individuals, economies and cultural objects can transcend once-rigid territorial borders and embrace a perpetual fluidity.<sup>7</sup> In practice, however, people remain physically and emotionally attached to place.

Where chapter two highlighted the dangers of a nostalgic and essentialist investment in suburbia, this chapter cautions against substituting rootedness and myths of origin for equally romantic, or postmodern, notions of perpetual mobility, transcendence or fragmentation. As Sarah Philips Casteel notes, mobility has long been associated with the colonial values of individuality and pioneering expansion in the national imagination, meaning that embracing absolute deterritorialisation is not necessarily counter-hegemonic.<sup>8</sup> In the years since Deleuze and Guattari called for the subjugated to mount micro-resistances to state power by embracing nomadism and pursuing new sensations, fluidity and competitive adaptability have emerged as the central tenets of market logic. The pair's radical language of desire increasingly resembles the rhetoric of neoliberal capitalism, consumption and distraction. And, considering this project's attention to processes of urban disinvestment, their charge to pursue 'lines of flight' is, at best, an unfortunate metaphor for practising philosophical abstraction.<sup>9</sup> Further, for certain groups – positioned at the margins of the world economic order – nomadism does not constitute free circulation around the globe, but rather instability, enforced movement and the absence of land rights.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> They write, 'The more the capitalist machine deterritorializes, decoding and axiomatizing flows in order to extract surplus value from them, the more its ancillary apparatuses, such as government bureaucracies and the forces of law and order, do their utmost to reterritorialize, absorbing in the process a larger and larger share of surplus value,' Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.37.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Stephen Graham, 'The End of Geography or the Explosion of Place? Conceptualising Space, Place and Information Technology,' *Progress in Geography*, Vol. 22 (April 1998), pp.165-85, or Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (New York: Verso, 2008), who equates globalisation with the necessary erosion of myths of origin, and heralds an embrace of perpetual mobility and un-belonging.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Philips Casteel, *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), p.2.

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.10.

<sup>10</sup> See Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), for an illuminating discussion of deterritorialisation in the context of women and ethnic minorities consigned to marginal positions.

I am interested, specifically, in these texts' distinct navigations of these issues, and argue that both ultimately recognise that openness and social responsibility 'involve a difficult game of mobility and rest,' and a probing – but not always deconstruction – of 'all the possible thresholds' that give meaning to their characters' lives.<sup>11</sup> In *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), Doreen Massey implores her reader to recognise that 'each place is the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations,' and that the character of a place emerges from its shifting interactions and socio-spatial practices at numerous levels.<sup>12</sup> Though certain peoples and areas – such as large cosmopolitan cities – have infinitely more power to initiate change, no person or place is ever simply 'a recipient of global forces, they are [...] the origin and propagator of them too,' and individual decisions might have repercussions throughout the whole system.<sup>13</sup> To accept that no single place can truly contain ideals or remain static in its relationships, is to recognise that space is inherently predicated upon multiplicities and co-existing trajectories, and thus cannot rightly be inserted into a single hierarchy or position in a 'historical queue.'<sup>14</sup>

Throughout this chapter, I interrogate assumptions about what constitutes the 'outside' for individuals and various communities, and explore the symbolic spaces of public and private, self and society, local and global, innate needs and imposed desires. Though *SPRAWL* focuses on developments in consumer culture, and *Tropic of Orange* examines racial and socio-economic diversification in a changing Los Angeles, neither attempts to map the vast currents of globalisation in any definitive way. Nor does my work analyse the accuracy of these fictional portrayals. Instead, I consider how these processes are negotiated – or internalised by – the protagonists, and come to be experienced affectively. As I tease out the disparities in these experiences, I suggest that they are inflected by the socio-economic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the characters, as well as by the spaces that they inhabit. I contend, moreover, that Dutton and Yamashita strive to navigate their characters' –

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<sup>11</sup> Rogerio Haesbaert, 'A Global Sense of Place and Multi-Territoriality: Notes for Dialogue from a 'Peripheral' Point of View,' *Spatial Politics: Essays for Doreen Massey*, ed. by David Featherstone and Joe Painter (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp.146-157, p.155; Danielle Dutton, *SPRAWL* (Los Angeles: Siglio Press, 2010), p.15.

<sup>12</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p.156.

<sup>13</sup> Massey, *World City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p.15.

<sup>14</sup> Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2005), p.5.

and perhaps their own – hopes and anxieties about perceived processes of deterritorialisation without producing literatures of absolute reterritorialisation or revived nationalism that ultimately foreclose this uncertainty and flux. Thus, both they and I attend to geographical materialism throughout, recognising the fractious, inconsistent, unequal dynamics of socio-spatial change.

It is my premise that Dutton and Yamashita offer more complex visions of both place and identity as multiple – at once rooted and nomadic – and constitute their local communities as part of an evolving global landscape. Focussing on cultural and spatial specificities whilst regarding universal claims with distrust, I argue that both authors attend to the contexts, histories, concepts and desires that reside in certain places, and foreground characters actively seeking out new affiliations based on mutuality and concern. In *SPRAWL* – the meandering internal monologue of a lonely, but intellectually curious, suburban woman – the narrator is unable to forge a stable, internally negotiated relationship with the landscape because suburbia, like her body, is as much an amalgamation of discourses as a physical entity. This is initially a source of great anxiety, since it forces her to question the relationship between suburban geography and suburban identity, and to reassess her role in perpetuating the dominant politics of that geography. However, this acceptance of social responsibility ultimately spurs her to take more affirmative, outward-focused action. Invoking the novel as a critical regionalist text that is deliberately ambivalent about the movement's roots in the phenomenology of Georges Perec and Gaston Bachelard, I argue that *SPRAWL* foregrounds its own numerous attempts and failures to invoke the affective experience of sprawl without reducing the complexity of that experience.<sup>15</sup> I also posit that the novel's constant oscillations materialise an awareness that tensions between territorialised and deterritorialised narratives of being and belonging must not give way to new totalisations.

Part two moves beyond rethinking spatiality in relation to dwelling and the internal structuring of identity, and it traces the wider geographies of race and class as they collide and intersect in Los Angeles' rapidly changing sprawl. Though similarly

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<sup>15</sup> Dutton cites the influence of both Bachelard and Perec in her acknowledgements. The narrator's attempt to embrace a Bachelardian retreat to the imagination in response to her fear of coercion from 'outside' forces is depicted as an unalloyed failure.

interested in the effects of media saturation and changing consumer relations, *Tropic of Orange* situates these aspects of contemporary globalisation – and the intensification of neoliberalism that is bound up with them – within a much more entrenched history of colonialism. Here, the environmental and social wrongs that various characters suffer can be linked to the ideals and practices of imperialism. Unlike several other novels of this era, discussed later in this chapter, which introduce immigrant presences into the suburbs only to play out familiar dramas of middle-class alienation and assimilation, I argue that this text negotiates what Tim Foster calls a ‘deterritorialised belonging,’ whilst challenging the imperial progress narrative by attending to the many historical and spatial inequalities that this narrative so often obfuscates.<sup>16</sup> Analysing Yamashita’s HyperContextual approach, I suggest that metafictionally foregrounding the process and purpose of storytelling emphasises the ways in which stories influence both our aesthetic and political decisions.<sup>17</sup> Where Dutton’s novel more clearly embodies what Ruth Hsu refers to as ‘certain strains of postmodernism that posit a non-centred subjectivity composed of endless linguistic play and of endless deferral of meaning,’ *Tropic of Orange*’s proliferating contexts *galvanise* political critique by demonstrating how more limited geo-political narratives have produced catastrophic material effects, and by making it virtually impossible to think of space and history in a fixed way.<sup>18</sup> Layering innumerable conceptual maps, Yamashita invokes a dense, interrelated network of people, places and objects. As the novel attends to the myriad experiences of L.A.’s diverse community, it imagines ways in which individuals might come together in moments of collective struggle, both aesthetically *and* in political practice.

### 3.1. Anxieties of Influence in Danielle Dutton’s *SPRAWL* (2010)

In the opening pages of *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (2007), Douglas Reichert Powell looks back at a decade of

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<sup>16</sup> Tim Foster, *Escaping the Split-Level Trap: Postsuburban Narratives in Recent American Fiction* (Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Nottingham, July 2012) p.174.

<sup>17</sup> Yamashita titles her grid-like contents page ‘HyperContexts.’ Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minnesota: Coffee House Press, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Ruth Y. Hsu, ‘Justice and Truthful Refractions,’ *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits*, ed. by Shirley Geok-lin Lim and others (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), p.78, as qtd. by Summer Gioia Harrison, *Environmental Justice Metafiction: Narrative and Politics in Contemporary Ethnic Women’s Novels by Louise Erdrich, Linda Hogan, Ruth Ozeki, and Karen Yamashita* (Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Wisconsin-Madison, July 2012), p.243.



devastating crises that included 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, and observes some of the ways in which conventional understandings of space and place have been challenged:

People in eastern Kentucky adopt the Twin Towers as a symbol of their commitment to place. People in Minnesota experience gas shortages because of the closure of ports in the Gulf of Mexico. [...] With all these convergences and concatenations of place, filtered, of course, through the economic and geographical complexities of the mass media, all attempts to construct the understandings of these events will necessarily be partial, single paths through a vast thicket of discursive relationships.<sup>19</sup>

In response, Powell advocates a flexible, transdisciplinary approach to cultural studies that centralises geography, connecting personal experience to broader historical, political and cultural patterns, by examining how they are linked in time and through discourse, but ‘also in space, through relationships of power that can be material and cultural.’<sup>20</sup> Though one can never hope to furnish a complete understanding of a single place, he suggests that tracing these connections incites a process of critical and creative exchange, whilst opening the spatial imaginary to a multiplicity of new perspectives and choices. He calls it critical regionalism.<sup>21</sup> Powell’s conceptualisation of the ‘region’ as a mutable rhetorical construction, invoked to describe relationships between individuals and areas, has its roots in 1920s architectural theory.<sup>22</sup> Yet, for Powell, confronting and reconceptualising this

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<sup>19</sup> Douglas Reichert Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p.4.

<sup>20</sup> Powell, pp.20-21.

<sup>21</sup> In 1981, architects Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis coined the term to define an approach that mediates, critically, between modern and postmodern architecture, universal progressive qualities and unique geographical and cultural context, and which counters both excessive local bias and ill-defined cosmopolitanism. See Alex Tzonis and Liliane Lefaivre, ‘The grid and the Pathway: An Introduction to the Work of Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis,’ *Architecture in Greece, Vol. 15* (1981), pp.164-178. As a cultural methodology, critical regionalism also derives from Soja’s 1989 work, *Postmodern Geographies*, which expounds the benefits of a ‘critical regional studies’ as an approach to rethinking the shifting relations between the urban, the national and the global. Such an approach is flexible and responsive to change, motivated to refuse old dualisms and explore new ideas. See Soja, p.189.

<sup>22</sup> Critical regionalism recalls Lewis Mumford’s work with the Regional Planning Association of America, which began in the 1920s. For Mumford, a region is not a bounded geography with essential characteristics, but a mutable and subjective network of relationships with a loose cultural, industrial and climatic unity. As such, planners should not approach it empirically, with regulatory or technocratic designs, but discursively, engaging reflexively with its indeterminacy and formulating more flexible relationships between populations and facilities. In *The South in Architecture* (1941),

liminal zone and the cultural conflicts it throws into relief has never been more urgent. Through its critical re-evaluation, Powell claims one might renegotiate the changing relationship between concepts of the 'local' and 'global,' situating small-scale and proximate crises and experiences within larger networks of material, political and socio-economic change, whilst grounding the effects of globalisation – its injustices and uneven developments – in local particularities.

The task of critical regionalism is thus not to define what regions *are*, thereby rendering them fixed and coherent, but to examine *how* ideas about them have come into being and harness the most effective tactics of description, in the hope that conveying knowledge of the spatial components of cultural politics will assist projects of change. Whilst architectural critic Kenneth Frampton uses the term to designate a 'place-conscious poetic' that underpins the creation of more just and hospitable 'architecture[s] of resistance,' Powell adopts it to describe a cultural methodology that supports the envisioning of new, more flexible languages of place.<sup>23</sup> Yet, as he notes, we must exercise caution as we 'contribute to that cultural history, participating in the ongoing creation of regional identities.'<sup>24</sup> Indeed, regions are amorphous objects of study, and creating or even analysing a text about them is part of the larger process of creating the regions themselves. As such, any attempt to invoke a region from a singular perspective, even critically, is potentially fraught.

Powell is right to claim that critical regionalism will only serve as an effective practice of intervention if its practitioners can illuminate for others the links between small-scale points of resistance to injustice and larger political, historical and social patterns. Yet such endeavours require time, material stability and information to which few outside academia have access. In part one, I argue that this uncomfortable

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Mumford stresses that 'every regional culture necessarily has a universal side to it. It is steadily open to influences that come from other parts of the world, and from other cultures, separated from the local region in space or time or both together [...] As with a human being, every culture must both be itself and transcend itself; [...] it must be open to fresh experience and yet it must maintain its integrity.' Lewis Mumford, *The South in Architecture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1941), p.38.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Frampton, 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,' *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), pp.16–30, p.27 and p.16 as qtd. by Powell, p.21. Frampton's architectural examples incorporate grids and idiosyncrasies, rational and a-rational elements, and include multiple cultural reference points. Frampton, p.25.

<sup>24</sup> Powell, p.5.

truth is not lost on Danielle Dutton, or on her affluent, middle-class narrator, whose anxieties of influence haunt the novel I discuss. Nevertheless, where critical regionalism's phenomenological forebears, Perec and Bachelard, produce something of a triumphant poetics of the everyday – arguably side-stepping the conundrum of speaking for or with a community by situating all liberating potential in the imagination – Dutton foregrounds a dense web of conflicting concerns and incompatible desires. Her protagonist, meanwhile, is so often aware that she is part of the problems and follies she articulates.<sup>25</sup> In what follows, I suggest that *SPRAWL* strives to take a palimpsestic approach to storytelling, moving between memoir, historical detail, fiction and evolving memories as it searches for new genealogies. Though presented to the reader as formidable grid of uniform, double-spaced lines of text, devoid of paragraph breaks, Dutton's novel – like the sprawl it represents – emerges as a multidimensional, layered spatiality that is inextricably intertwined with broader social, political and environmental shifts; it is a text that connects the personal to the social, the material to the affective.

### **I. A 'Triumphant' Poetics of the Everyday**

In *Ordinary Affects* (2007), cultural critic Kathleen Stewart alludes to phenomenology when she determines 'to slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique,' and develop a deeper, more inclusive understanding of place, by focusing on how the senses apprehend minor shifts in the immediate environment.<sup>26</sup> More recently, in the collection *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art and Everyday Life* (2015), editors Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell and Robert Hudson consider the relationship between space, place, memory and affect, and argue that learning to appreciate the 'everyday, the unnoticed and the small-scale' constitutes a 'gentle politics' that renounces the established politics of the neoliberal present.<sup>27</sup> Both self-professed critical regionalist texts contain echoes of Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958). As an architectural treatise, Bachelard's

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<sup>25</sup> At times, Dutton's text drips with sarcasm: 'I get pleasure from acquiring knowledge about everything from hands and feet to handmade wicker baskets,' states the narrator, in apparent earnest, before sneering that, 'Several of my table-tops are tilted for better locating the centre of my domestic charisma.' Dutton, pp.20-21.

<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p.4.

<sup>27</sup> Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell and Robert Hudson (eds.), *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art and Everyday Life: Memory, Place and The Senses* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), p.4.

text stands in sharp contradistinction to the anti-historical, assembly line ethos of 1950s suburbanisation. Instead of outlining abstract rationales, it urges architects to consider the experiences and emotional responses that their projects might engender, and dedicates its pages to an exploration of all the possible memories and sensations that might be activated by various spatial types. Taken together, he claims that these myriad responses might reveal something fundamental about the soul, the very essence of living. For Bachelard, therefore, the house is not an inert object to be defined, but a transcendent space that takes the imagination on a journey through time. The domestic interior is the place where personal experience reaches its zenith, and the best architecture – stirring memories and hinting at other times and other places – slows time and expands space.

I have already suggested that, as architectural theory, Bachelard's treatise is increasingly conservative.<sup>28</sup> *The Poetics of Space* offers little in the way of guidelines for those wishing to revitalise the cramped 'urban boxes' or low-rise sprawl that he so clearly derides for a lack of history.<sup>29</sup> Nor does it account for the fact that architects rarely have the time, space or funds to adopt an entirely phenomenological-poetic approach, designing houses with their clients' contemplation and self-discovery at the fore. At worst, it implies that those without a stable home from which to take imaginative flights of fancy might never learn to dream, an insinuation that part two of this chapter emphatically refutes.

Nevertheless, Bachelard is arguably less interested in architectural practice than in creating an architecture of the imagination. His book is a paean to the poetic image – an essence of the soul itself, a product of the unconscious mind – that springs forth in unexpected moments and captures the true spirit of the world around us. Though certain spaces might facilitate its emergence more than others, anyone can receive this sense of inner vastness and ensuing oneness with the world if only they know how to listen for it. What is required is receptivity to the physical environment, an ability to forget conventional ways of appraising the world and a willingness to be surprised and delighted by the unanticipated effects of a poetic image. Such images

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<sup>28</sup> See the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>29</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p.26.

might be generated during the most solitary and intimate of activities: reading. They do not originate in the mind of the author, though certain texts – particularly poetry – are more salutary than others, borne of more expansive minds. Instead, the image is activated by the reader, flowing straight from their soul before conscious thought can interrupt it. In this conceptualisation, the image, or the language that evokes it, is no longer a substitute for a perceptible reality: it enriches reality. Bachelard wonders at the miracle that ‘an image, at times very unusual, [can] appear to be a concentration of the entire psyche,’ and can, in turn ‘react on other minds and in other hearts, despite all the barriers of common sense.’<sup>30</sup> As images move from soul to soul, eluding causality, they create an experience of ‘trans-subjectivity’ that cannot be co-opted, contained or excluded. Over time, these ‘reverberations bring about a change of being,’ both singularly and collectively.<sup>31</sup> To understand the thresholds that we have constructed between inside and out, self and other, and to expose the multiplicities that reside within seemingly bounded spaces, we must begin by reflecting upon the poetic image, Bachelard concludes. Only by studying it phenomenologically – or relationally – will we come to understand ‘the values of inhabited space, of the non-I that protects the I.’<sup>32</sup>

Georges Perec furthers this approach with *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1974). In many ways, this is a delightful, irreverent book, which displays absolute confidence in the power of language and the imagination to capture the plurality of any single place – its textures, experiences and shifting dynamics. ‘Stop thinking in ready-made terms, forget what the town planners and sociologists have said,’ he suggests. ‘There’s something frightening in the very idea of the town; you get the impression you can fasten only on to tragic or despairing images of it – Metropolis, the mineral universe, the world turned to stone – that you can only go on endlessly piling up unanswerable questions.’<sup>33</sup> A landscape will become legible to us not by defining its territory or fixing its purpose, Perec argues, but by recording our responses to it – all memories, side-steps and accidents – and by leaving space in the margins, both literally and metaphorically, for others to add to these layers at whim.

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<sup>30</sup> Bachelard, p.xix.

<sup>31</sup> Bachelard, p.xxii.

<sup>32</sup> Bachelard, p.5.

<sup>33</sup> Georges Perec *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London: Penguin Classics, 1997), p.54.

Thus, what we had once considered to be an objective phenomenon becomes malleable, an entity that continues to emerge; it is an immanent poetry of the streets, constructed from the ground up.

Resonances of Perec and Bachelard's justifications and tactics reverberate through critical regionalism. Like Bachelard, Kathleen Stewart proclaims that invoking 'the notion of a totalised system' – be it neoliberalism, advanced capitalism or globalisation – 'of which everything is always already somehow a part,' does not begin to describe how economic, political, and social forces shape, and are shaped by, individual lives.<sup>34</sup> Though undeniably pressing, these issues should be brought into view as 'a scene of immanent force,' not left 'looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world.'<sup>35</sup> Attending to the disparate, anecdotal and seemingly insignificant experiences of day-to-day life not only exchanges abstract certainties for curiosity and contingency, but also invokes the local sphere as a point of contact for all sorts of political, social, economic and technological flows and feelings that connect people through time and across space. Stewart calls these ordinary affects, and defines them as sensations, desires, habits, dreams, interactions, attachments, moments of confusion and clarity, and strategies that alternately succeed and fail. Akin to Bachelard's poetic image, 'they can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock,' and build in density as they 'move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings.'<sup>36</sup> In fact, they are so fractious and multiplicitous that they cannot be imbued with a fixed meaning. To record such fleeting, erratic sensations, one must learn to write as though 'the writing were itself a form of life,' pursuing sensations, changing course, repeating oneself, dragging even the most mundane observations into view then watching as they give way to something new.<sup>37</sup>

It is easy to see why the suburbs, so frequently envisioned as bland, generic landscapes, have appealed to critical regionalists seeking to foreground the sensuous geographies and personal experiences that animate all spaces. For memoirist D.J. Waldie, for example, suburbia is the ideal place to exchange an iconographic

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<sup>34</sup> Stewart, p.1.

<sup>35</sup> Stewart, p.1.

<sup>36</sup> Stewart, p.3.

<sup>37</sup> Stewart, p.5.

structure for an ‘imaginative inner landscape compounded of memory and longing, that seeks to be connected to an outer landscape of people, circumstances and things.’<sup>38</sup> I agree that attending to affect – to individual sensations of belonging, exclusion, desire and desperation – does not impede a consideration of broader political patterns, and may in fact provide a truer map of the dynamic qualities of space, paving the way for a more relational politics. Yet, one should perhaps be wary of invoking a creative and predominantly personal process *as* criticism, lest it perpetuate certain uncomfortable assumptions about which kinds of people, from which locations, should be permitted to participate in the production of knowledge, beauty and cultural value.<sup>39</sup> Any suggestion of an autonomous subject that can somehow separate itself from, or even organise, social reality risks summoning a single otherness or a universal subject that has ‘home’ as its affective compass point.

In the following sections, I explore Danielle Dutton’s highly self-conscious navigation of these potential pitfalls. Throughout the novel, Dutton’s narrator veers wildly from intense self-analysis to ruthless defeatism, selfishness to social concern, alternately perceiving her environment as an extension of her subjectivity and a locus in thrall to global socio-economic forces far beyond her control. At times, she is so convinced of the power of her imagination that she treats the world with a terrifying arbitrariness, as though it is entirely unreal. In other moments, she strives so hard to act as a conduit for other people’s stories and sensations that she loses a sense of self entirely, morphing into a nomadic subjectivity, a Deleuzian body without organs. Through an analysis of *SPRAWL*, I consider the scope for stopping strategies conceived of as critical responses to sprawl – or specifically, to the neoliberal drives that shape sprawl – from being incorporated into its reproduction. I examine Dutton’s anxieties about the efficacy of recording fragments as a means of

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<sup>38</sup> D.J. Waldie, ‘Ordinary Time: The Making of a Catholic Imagination,’ *Spiritus* Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring 2007), pp.58-67, p.62.

<sup>39</sup> Neil Campbell argues that Waldie, whose memoirs include *Holy Land* (1996) and *Where We are Now: Notes from Los Angeles* (2004), ‘stands at the forefront of an expanded or reframed critical regionalism.’ By transforming the suburban landscape into ‘a mosaic of episodes made up of memoirs, gathered stories, observations and other fragments that demonstrate precisely why it is worth noticing and how its multiple narratives [...] enmesh us into not just local, but national and international histories,’ Waldie demonstrates ‘suburbia as a vital element in the field.’ Neil Campbell, ‘The Compass of Possibilities: Re-mapping the Suburbs of Los Angeles in the Writings of D.J. Waldie,’ *European Journal of American Studies*, No.2 (October 2011) <<http://hdl.handle.net/10545/145903>> [Accessed 20 March 2018], pp.2-3.

countering totalising histories, and I ask, finally, whether these accumulated fragments fetishize sprawl, or simply testify to Dutton's feelings of powerlessness to intervene, both in literature and practice.

## II. A Distinctly Suburban *SPRAWL*

Embarking on a midnight walk through her unidentified suburban neighbourhood, the nameless narrator of Danielle Dutton's *SPRAWL* observes the consumer goods on display in her neighbours' houses, and wryly imagines her own home as an 'auspicious site for an increase in population and economy.'<sup>40</sup> This moment of clarity is followed by extreme confusion when, on returning home, she rings her doorbell and steps onto the welcome mat, only to remember that 'no one's there' and she is waiting for herself in vain.<sup>41</sup> That this strange sense of fragmentation manifests itself as an 'information overload', in which space and time are momentarily compressed into a cacophony of 'constant noise – the door bells, lawn mowers, leaf blowers, car horns, electric gates, television aerials' – is telling.<sup>42</sup> In 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society,' Fredric Jameson heralds an irrevocable crisis in historicity triggered by enormous changes in scale, arguing that subjects are increasingly incapable of experiencing the world except as a series of 'isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence.'<sup>43</sup> For Jameson, ever since speculative finance and the global marketplace displaced the industrial and imperialist stages of capitalism in the early 1970s, all agreed-upon divisions between social spheres had begun to collapse. In this state of worldwide interconnectedness, vast distances are traversed at the click of a button, people flow rapidly across territorial boundaries, unregulated consumption and building practices eviscerate the physical and conceptual barriers between areas, and global products 'penetrate' local markets and the home. The result, Marc Augé claims, is a destabilisation of the 'sociological notion of place' as 'a culture localised in time and space,' and the untethering of social hierarchies from territory, producing cultural

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<sup>40</sup> Dutton, p.77.

<sup>41</sup> Dutton, p.77.

<sup>42</sup> Dutton, p.77.

<sup>43</sup> Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society,' *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), p.119.



homogenisation without community, adjacency without intimacy.<sup>44</sup> It is experienced, both theorists assert, as profoundly disorientating.

Though physically rooted in her suburban environment, Dutton's narrator suddenly finds herself incapable of differentiating between public and private, inside and outside, self and world, and 'powerless to influence change in the landscape.'<sup>45</sup> It is a rare moment when the novel's plot mirrors – and thus *seems* to explain – its similarly fragmented form. Dutton, it would appear, falls prey to what both Doreen Massey and Kathleen Stewart warn against; she invokes a totalised capitalist system that originates from 'elsewhere' and imposes itself upon a once-coherent subjectivity. And it is hard to sympathise with her narrator's plight. Indeed, her problem is not enforced mobility or socio-economic precarity, but an embarrassment of riches – she is literally assaulted by choice. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari's ideal nomadic subject, however, she cannot seem to make it work for her. At night, she casts terrified glances outside at the advancing sidewalk, which bombards her with the inane question, 'How do I look?'<sup>46</sup> During the day, she stands beside her husband in front of the television and realises that they are simultaneously united and divided by '\$10.00 worth of real Tupperware, an exhibited foyer, a brand new Ford convertible.'<sup>47</sup> All the while, she struggles desperately to maintain the semblance of a happy marriage and perpetuate absurdly essentialist 'suburban' practices like matching her clothes to her interiors and cooking obscene feasts for her neighbours. And, when new residents arrive 'from some politically underdeveloped country halfway around the world,' she is quietly appalled.<sup>48</sup> In appearing to revive the 1950s paradigms of domesticated womanhood and domineering manhood – even as she portrays them as being under threat – Dutton seems to display a bewildering rhetorical nostalgia for the once-indomitable, gendered spheres of public and private.

It would be easy to misread *SPRAWL* as one, long, fearful wail about a loss of 'authenticity' and middle-class distinction in a changing metropolitan landscape, or, more broadly, as a metaphor for the decline of American hegemony and the nation's

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<sup>44</sup> Augé, p.28.

<sup>45</sup> Dutton, p.19.

<sup>46</sup> Dutton, p.105.

<sup>47</sup> Dutton, p.128.

<sup>48</sup> Dutton, p.40.

new permeability to outside forces. It could even be read as a stylistic fetishisation of fragmentation and distraction. Certainly, when analysing Dutton's experimental style, critic Thomas Turner does not hesitate to conclude, 'If Dutton wanted to convey the unravelling of body, soul, land and community that happens in the suburbs in a concrete and hyper-literal way, she has surely accomplished her goal.'<sup>49</sup> Yet such a view does not take account of the constantly foregrounded tensions between the narrator and author, or the perpetually affirmed differences between what the narrator perceives, and what *is*. Indeed, even as the narrator personalises her surroundings, presenting her narrative as an autobiographical stream of consciousness, Dutton frequently scatters clues that remind the reader not accept the narrator's univocal views unquestioningly. Nor does Turner's review recognise the mutability of the narrator's own viewpoint – its shifts from earnestness to sardonic self-awareness – and the fact that it evolves, albeit almost imperceptibly, towards inclusivity as the novel progresses. I interpret *SPRAWL* not as a vulgar celebration of privilege, but as a self-consciously anxious text that interrogates *how*, and to what extent, our individual practices, experiences and social, political and cultural fates fragment or intertwine in the modern world.

In fact, Dutton's novel is not the first to take the word 'sprawl' for its title. A year after Jameson invoked a postmodern hyperspace, William Gibson published *Neuromancer* (1984), the first in a science-fiction series that would come to be known as The Sprawl Trilogy. Unfolding over 16 years in a fictional near-future, the trilogy explores the effects of a ubiquitous global information space, which Gibson calls 'cyberspace.' Much of the action takes place in The Sprawl, a boundless, high-tech urban environment that has engulfed the east coast of the United States, and from which there is little hope of escape. Gibson's vision, in turn, is familiar; from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to Mega-City One in the *Judge Dredd* comic book universe (1977-), images of nightmarish, nation-spanning monoliths have long proliferated in science fiction and film. Particularly chilling about Gibson's sprawl is its total lack of temporality or opportunity for progressive change; here, there is no

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Turner, 'Brief Review: *SPRAWL* by Danielle Dutton,' *Englewood Review of Books*, Vol. 3, No. 38 (22 October 2010).

distinction between day and night, and characters are disposable and substitutable.<sup>50</sup> Like Jameson, Gibson advances an image of a world corralled into a single narrative trajectory, its endless sprawl embodying ‘a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button. Stop hustling and you sank without a trace.’<sup>51</sup> To survive and thrive in this world without frontiers, his characters must remain mobile, adaptable and constantly innovative, using consumer goods and digital communication to adopt a range of pre-packaged guises and identities. Essentially, they must become ideal neoliberal subjects.

Considering ‘sprawl’s’ fictional heritage, Dutton’s version unsettles the reader’s expectations from the outset. Her landscape is not a hostile, depthless no-place, but a vaguely recognisable suburb whose inhabitants are still navigating the stereotypes laid down by the first wave of critics, alternately embracing and reviling images of a homogenised, coherent, rigidly bounded community.<sup>52</sup> Even so, it *too* is a dynamic, mediated spatiality, its boundaries traversed by the media, cultural influences and heterogeneous communities. In Jameson and Gibson’s visions of connectivity and collapse, technology and mobility have transformed the world into an omnipresent centre, rendering insignificant the distinctions between city, suburb and country. Their universe is virtually post-geographic. Whether intentionally or not, *SPRAWL* flags up such views as ethnocentric hyperbole. Though the narrator frequently *feels* herself to be alienated, this is not a novel about the ruthless appropriation of the individual body against the hostile backdrop of an increasingly global culture. Crucially, the ‘constant noise’ that the narrator describes in moments of panic is neither the relentless hum of Lauren Berlant’s cruel affective tethers nor a cacophony accompanying the wave of drugs, pollutants and crime allegedly pouring from the city beyond. Instead, it is the sound of daily life as it emerges from her neighbours’ driveways to form a sort of mundane orchestra. Sprawl, in this conceptualisation, is not chaos, or a metonym for neoliberalism as a global *fait-accompl*i. The narrator’s landscape may be changing, in ways that I will define, but these changes are not

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<sup>50</sup> The sky is described as ‘the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.’ William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: HarperCollins, 2015), p.9.

<sup>51</sup> Gibson, p.14.

<sup>52</sup> The second line, ‘What influences the Richardsons? What influences the Sainstburys?’ invokes a communal identity shored up by competitive consumption, posturing and privilege. Dutton, p.5.

inherently destructive of community, place identity or domestic comforts, and innumerable sites still look a lot like the suburb that Dutton describes.

Yet it is worth asking why such a privileged subject of the consumer economy feels so entirely disempowered by it, and why the narrator imagines changing spatial dynamics as an assault on her bodily integrity. Like Elaine Weiss, the narrator repeatedly equates her house with her body, and invokes both the officious media that infiltrates the domestic sphere and the ‘discontinuous innovation’ that surrounds it as a masculine, violating force that renders her property ‘transparent like a membrane’ and transforms her body into a ‘building made of glass with the gates left open.’<sup>53</sup> These feelings of exposure and reduction do not simply attest to the narrator’s vague anxieties about the dissolution of white middle-class privilege. Nor are they entirely unwarranted or without context. Rather, the disparities between the narrator’s experience and that of her husband speak to the ways in which the female body and its desires have been produced, homogenised and repressed by a patriarchal economy that equates space with a femininity that must not change.

In *Space, Place and Gender*, Doreen Massey reveals that, whilst time has historically been aligned with ‘progress, civilisation, politics, [...] transcendence’ and pioneering masculinity, space has been perpetually relegated to the status of non-being, absence, stasis, passivity and lack.<sup>54</sup> It has, moreover, been repeatedly coded as feminine. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, the chôra – a fluid, characterless, intermediary space that nurtures the Polis into being, without itself having a physical reality – can be directly equated with the womb; both, he suggests, are mere receptacles with temporary topologies that bring the masculine pioneer into Being.<sup>55</sup> That Dutton’s narrator has internalised this view – or is at least wryly aware of the force it exerts – is implied throughout. Early in *SPRAWL*, the narrator describes a game that she plays with her husband Haywood, in which he articulates a room and she is expected to close her eyes and move within it. If one is to conflate home and feminine being, this seemingly innocuous pastime emerges as something far more sinister: the patriarchal Haywood

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<sup>53</sup> Dutton, p.5 (the narrator is describing the building projects taking place around her); p.69.

<sup>54</sup> Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, p.6. In part one of chapter two, I account for the accent placed upon space in postmodern understandings of the world.

<sup>55</sup> See Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. by D.J. Zeyl (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000).

is not merely dictating the dimensions of the domestic space, but is drawing out the boundaries of his wife's subjectivity.

Though not directly addressed in the previous chapter, both 'Raw Water' and *Music For Torching* confront a cultural discourse – perpetuated as much by early suburban fiction and film as by sociological studies – that represents women as the stable, unchanging yin to their restless husbands' yang.<sup>56</sup> As Tower's Rodney Booth galivants around treating women like territories to be conquered, his wife Cora must serve as the maternal chora; a receptacle which holds and supports him, a paradigm of domesticity that Rodney eventually expels in order to construct himself. Less parodic and more complex, Homes' novel invokes Elaine's suffering as infinitely sharper than Paul's, drawing parallels throughout between the destruction of the Weisses' home and Elaine's burgeoning inability to recognise herself in the word 'mum,' or to determine where she ends, and the world begins. Without the house that physically restricted her and made her miserable, she feels that she simply ceases to exist; she remains 'imprisoned' by the dominant order whichever route she takes.

In *SPRAWL*, the complex spatial drama played out in the early pages of the novel represents a futile battle to appropriate a space 'apart.' Lost amid a sensory overload of marketing images, and hemmed in by magazine advice and a domineering husband with 'Protestant [...] stories of utility to tell women,' the narrator frequently feels like a detached performer locked in a bitter recital of contradictory consumer and feminine identities.<sup>57</sup> Wherever she goes, her patriarchal husband bestows her insubstantial frame with a temporary corporeality by holding 'objects up against [her] body so that [she] hardens into wrinkles and strange postures' around them.<sup>58</sup> Her simultaneously fearful and excited realisation that, 'All sorts of men look at me as I move in confined spaces' evokes the paradoxical nature of her dilemma.<sup>59</sup> Both *stultified* within the domestic sphere and *exposed* to the contradictory 'freedoms' of an increasingly global culture, the narrator veers between a desperate desire for true

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<sup>56</sup> In Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, David Gates' *Jernigan* and the bulk of Cheever's stories, for example, men leave while women remain wedded to home and hearth. In *Revolutionary Road*, meanwhile, the heavily pregnant April must die for Frank to 'see.'

<sup>57</sup> Dutton, p.7.

<sup>58</sup> Dutton, p.17.

<sup>59</sup> Dutton, p.56.

privacy and the urge to be known. Her desire to rescue space from its depoliticised, inert position is accompanied by the terror that she will no longer recognise herself in it if she does. Dutton's words paint a bleak portrait of an individual desperately seeking a material and spiritual centre – an individual for whom consumer products and suburban clichés offer nothing more than a momentary solace. Caught up in an 'essentialised hermeneutics' that considers identity exclusively in terms of a cultural inheritance, the narrator tries desperately to ground her selfhood in the adoption of 'normalising activities,' material goods and encoded relations that do nothing but make her miserable.<sup>60</sup>

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), De Certeau claims that certain practices of consumption are active, imaginative processes, and that individuated *uses* of architectural space might offset any feelings of being coerced or dominated by it. By taking micro steps outside that which is prescribed or expected – whether by walking an unconventional route or by using products in unintended ways – individuals might gain the temporary elation of having subverted norms. Yet De Certeau's form of empowerment is problematic, dependent upon privilege to experiment and autonomy to deviate. Whilst the precise scenario expressed in *SPRAWL* may not be what de Certeau has in mind, it nonetheless points to the limitations of his notion of subversion. Confined largely to the domestic sphere and the places she can reach safely on foot, in daylight, there is a vital difference between the female narrator's experience and that of her working husband. Furthermore, De Certeau simply avoids the question of how to redefine restrictive places and hegemonic social expectations in any durable way.<sup>61</sup> Instead, his tactics are outside the dominant order because they

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<sup>60</sup> Foster, p.155; Dutton, p.12.

<sup>61</sup> De Certeau's invocation of walking as metaphor and exemplum of transgressive practice differs from Lefebvre's. For De Certeau, these practices cannot be documented, since to do so would mean measuring them within a hegemonic space: tactics cannot be coded *as* transgressive unless they are defined against the dominant order. Dissatisfied with the way that knowledge is produced, he claims that subversion must be covert and temporary, operating as a 'second, poetic geography' composed of the myriad trajectories of walkers, that exists 'on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning' (p.xviii). Thus, walking represents the refusal to occupy any one single space, even though physical boundaries and rules of inclusion/exclusion may become visible through the attempt to cross them. In contrast, Lefebvre suggests that minor distortions of space might eventually reshape the dominant social order, in both art *and* practice. In *The Production of Space*, he claims that enjoying the sunshine and moments of feeling 'free' within one's own body represent transgressions within the sign-driven capitalist order, since 'what is wanted is materiality and naturalness as such, rediscovered in their (apparent or real) immediacy,' p.353. Though arguably utopian for implying that the experience of leisure is available to all, Lefebvre's conceptualisation finds apt expression in Yamashita's portrait of homeless migrants – discussed in part two of this chapter – who successfully

*cannot* be assigned to a territory; they depend entirely on seizing momentary opportunities in time. Such practices – successful because they are barely discernible – do nothing to interfere with (gendered) power dynamics or conventional procedures of gaining knowledge.<sup>62</sup> Unaccompanied by a rhetorical deconstruction of the entire *way* in which space has been essentialised as inert, invariable and feminine, the narrator's tactics lack context or value. Her attempt to 'create disorder' by 'placing dishes upside-down on top of glasses,' before returning them to their rightful position when Haywood gets home, is futile.<sup>63</sup> It is like building without careful consideration of historical precedent or social processes: seeking to 'engineer' better communities, without first considering how and why previous communities have struggled and thrived, is bound to fail.

Nevertheless, there is a certain humorous absurdity about the narrator's actions as she 'move[s] in the shade on the edge of a parking lot, around the edge of a curve in an accidental manner,' though whether she is wryly self-aware is hard to tell.<sup>64</sup> Such tensions prevent pity from becoming the reader's dominant reaction. Dutton might situate her narrator's emotional responses within a broader historical, political and social framework, demonstrating the complicated and variable experience of place, but she does not vindicate her entirely. The narrator is just as dreamy and offhand as she is anxious and repressed. Arguably, it is she who 'sprawls,' drifting from place to place; she is a casualty of her own boredom and privilege, who follows fads until they no longer appeal. Or, perhaps this is merely how she wishes to appear.

In fact, the tactics employed by the narrator in search of an autonomous, non-pre-assigned relationship with her surroundings are not merely spatial. Early in the novel, she unexpectedly declares, 'we pick off spiders walking the circumference of our town.'<sup>65</sup> It is a phrase that not only calls forth a suburb whose boundaries are produced and ensnared within a restrictive web of imposed meaning, but also subtly

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forge a more durable, visible space of play within the dominant order: laughing, dancing, eating and sunbathing at the site of a motorway crash.

<sup>62</sup> If anything, de Certeau's tactics reify the idea of space as a chora through which things pass, but within which nothing can be retained; it is a space which receives everything without becoming anything.

<sup>63</sup> Dutton, p.65.

<sup>64</sup> Dutton, p.6.

<sup>65</sup> Dutton, p.107.

furnishes an understanding of the artistic project she goes on to define. In the 1928 work, *Anarchism is Not Enough* – a work Dutton cites in her Acknowledgements section – Laura Riding famously describes the arts and sciences thus: ‘We live on the circumference of a hollow circle. We draw the circumference, like spiders, out of ourselves: it is all criticism of criticism.’<sup>66</sup> Hemmed in by a Corpus of group demands, the creative individual finds it almost impossible to create work that is not mired in such imperatives. Over time, the monolithic Corpus grows, claiming status as historical reality and leaving a void where authenticity should have thrived. Thus, for Riding, there exists a fundamental dichotomy between self and society, art and life. In *The Ideologies of Theory* (1988), Jameson takes a similarly humanist perspective – arguing that the flexibility of the global system jeopardises the position of the artist and their aura – and calls for ‘a new realism to resist the power of reification in consumer society.’<sup>67</sup> Riding’s solution is a radical one; since there is no ‘space’ to be oneself in the social realm, individuals must endeavour to isolate themselves altogether and produce work based entirely on momentary sensual impressions. That such work will be deficient in broader historical and social significance is of no consequence, since it will be radically committed to shedding falsely accumulated selves and plumbing the deeper truths of an authentic selfhood.

Sensing herself to be ‘absorbed into a place where people make themselves up out of certain images of mediated public phenomena,’ Dutton’s narrator is at times haunted by the feeling that she will only regain ‘control of [her] speech’ by ‘disentangl[ing herself] from organised group activities’ and forging a space apart through imagination and the written word.<sup>68</sup> Whilst appearing to be ‘free from design or discretion’ and ‘behav[ing] in a way to be admired, mounted, like a pretty hen,’ she constructs an *invisible* barrier that insulates her from the dominant order and permits her to capture ‘the critical authenticity of every historical moment.’<sup>69</sup>

Early on, the narrator clarifies her project in what appears to be a direct address to the reader: ‘take two or three sheets of paper and make a journal of anything

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<sup>66</sup> Laura Riding, *Anarchism is Not Enough* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), p.31.

<sup>67</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986. Volume 2: The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.146.

<sup>68</sup> Dutton, p.108.

<sup>69</sup> Dutton, p.7; p.18; p.17.



remarkable that occurs in the next few days.’<sup>70</sup> It could almost be Perec speaking from the past, invoking language as the place where ‘space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it.’<sup>71</sup> It is also an invitation to reconsider the novel as an autobiography; as the product of the narrator’s musings. Riding lauds the stream of consciousness technique employed by Gertrude Stein as an apt exemplum of truly creative poesis. It is not difficult to discern Stein’s influence in the novel’s sensory feast of seemingly fleeting, non-linear impressions, which are descriptive and intensely subjective, punctuated by imagination as much as by event. Mundane objects are lovingly, almost obsessively described and juxtaposed, and digressions are myriad, creating an uncanniness that transforms the quotidian into the strange and beautiful: ‘toasted oats on the kitchen counter, a crystal vase with dirty water and fading flower stems, fallen petals, fallen pistils, a blue and white plate;’ the ‘gleaming sedan’ that ‘makes its own cooling noises in the dark garage;’ and the cat that ‘doesn’t matter so much as the feelings its tiny feet feel.’<sup>72</sup> By dispensing with linearity, changing direction at whim and refusing to replace one dogma or form of oppression with another, Dutton’s narrator mounts an artistic rebellion against the rigid, masculine temporal thrust of history, whilst opening space to polycentricity. As she tells her story, she realises that Haywood can impose ‘derisive nickname[s]’ on the way she looks, sounds and has sex, but he cannot access her ‘sudden ideas [...] so many ideas, scenes, sudden beauty.’<sup>73</sup> Metaphorically locking herself away in her thoughts, she quietly rewrites the equation of women and space whilst seeming, so absolutely, to inhabit it.

### III. ‘A sick and moody privacy’

There are times, however, when the narrator’s tactics are described in somewhat ambivalent terms, as evasive, disconnected and, ultimately, isolating. ‘I pretend to be increasingly deaf,’ she writes. ‘In this way I put Haywood in a little book in the dark.’<sup>74</sup> Earlier, she observes with some satisfaction that she is ‘becoming detached from the routine of lawn, lawn, office building,’ before revealing, ‘I get the mail in my open kimono and meet the neighbours’ stares with my own absence:’ a claim that

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<sup>70</sup> Dutton, p.17.

<sup>71</sup> Perec, p.13.

<sup>72</sup> Dutton, p.48; p.45; p.17.

<sup>73</sup> Dutton, p.86.

<sup>74</sup> Dutton, p.106.

betrays a worrying level of depersonalisation and anomie.<sup>75</sup> More interesting, perhaps, is the fact that even her moments of elation are tempered by hints of a strangely aggressive, territorial individualism. By enclosing herself in a stream of consciousness, the narrator doesn't transcend her environmental setting as much as *transform* it into an extension of her subjectivity. In the midst of a phase of intense boredom, the narrator is suddenly invigorated by the indescribable beauty of 'sprays of white flowers near the base of nearby trees,' and finds herself transported to a realm where, 'everything around me swells to mythical size, my own face is reflected in the skies and trees, and I am more immortal than ever.'<sup>76</sup> As her confidence grows, she strides across lawns, 'conquering' the grid-shaped streets, and sticking flags in the dirt.<sup>77</sup> On one hand, Dutton captures all the pleasure and promise of imaginative roaming, going as far as to suggest that the geometric boundaries of suburbia are little more than ideological restrictions that might be surmounted through the power of thought alone. Using startlingly similar rhetoric, Bachelard contends that 'space that has been *seized upon* by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor.'<sup>78</sup> As the narrator invests the landscape with her own longings and daydreams – recognising that, 'The tree outside the window can be sad if I think it so' – her external environment shapes itself around her, ceasing to represent a restrictive force and coming to embody her spiritual core.<sup>79</sup>

However, in imagining her environment as unclaimed space, the narrator does not forge a positive personal relationship with her surroundings so much as deny the history of the landscape and exclude others from it. Promoting herself to godlike status, she literally sees her face reflected at her from all angles. In a novel with rich descriptive imagery, the narrator's most transcendent imaginative flights are simultaneously the least visually precise or accessible to the reader. 'My face is probably magnificent,' she declares, without bothering to describe it.<sup>80</sup> Her independence comes at the cost of recognition. This is not the only occasion when

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<sup>75</sup> Dutton, p.99.

<sup>76</sup> Dutton, p.114.

<sup>77</sup> Dutton, p.114.

<sup>78</sup> Bachelard, p.xxxvi, my italics.

<sup>79</sup> Dutton, p.117.

<sup>80</sup> Dutton, p.104.

the reader is trapped within the narrator's subjectivity without being permitted to understand or empathise with her experience: while recounting a fight with her husband, the narrator refuses to divulge either the nature of their argument or the exchange of dialogue, merely acknowledging the momentary sensation of 'how soft [her] hair is, how it shines when [she] bends over the news.'<sup>81</sup> This curiously static snapshot is both trivial and strangely tragic: in relentlessly recording her fleeting sensations, the narrator does not just isolate herself from the reader, but insulates herself from the consequences of her actions and the gravity of her emotions.

'I am wary of those who posit revolution as imagination liberated from hierarchical modes of thought and behaviour,' writes Jonathan Raban in *Soft City* (1974), explaining that it betrays a certain suspicion of place itself as mere reactionary façade.<sup>82</sup> Though it is invaluable to challenge rationalism and domesticate alienating external processes with consciousness, habits and superstitions, doing so to the exclusion of the outside world risks rendering it entirely illegible. After all, we do not live entirely in a world of our own devising: we are constantly confronted with places and people that we did not choose, and to believe otherwise will, Raban fears, only result in greater alienation, hostility or defensive practices when we are forced to acknowledge the disjunct. What is the value, he wonders, in literatures of disembodied stimuli, which take such an 'egotistical and aesthetic view of life, and convert everything into food for the omnivorous I?'<sup>83</sup> It is a question worth posing of Perec and Bachelard's phenomenology. In a sense, such work is implicated in exactly that which it seeks to contest: hierarchical, exclusionary, alienating modes of thought. Ironically, advocating a retreat to self assumes what Arjun Appadurai calls the 'salience, both methodological and ethical, of the nation-state' by invoking fantasy and the imagination as 'antidotes to the finitude of social experience.'<sup>84</sup> Far from working uncritically in their shadow, however, Dutton tackles the dangers of embracing the invisible geographies of longing – to the exclusion of complex material realities – head on. In certain moments, the narrator reads sprawl as nothing more than a bad geography that she might simply refuse through a retreat to her

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<sup>81</sup> Dutton, p.57.

<sup>82</sup> Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (London: Picador, 2008), p.141.

<sup>83</sup> Raban, p.205.

<sup>84</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.53.

imagination. Yet not only does it prove impossible to transcend her material conditions or de-historicise her surroundings for any significant period, but it also turns out to be deeply unappealing. Her attempts to anchor her body and her suburb as static, fortified entities leave her feeling insulated from others and further from attaining self-knowledge. It is, she concedes miserably, a ‘sick and moody privacy.’<sup>85</sup>

Dutton employs the image of the gated community as metaphor and exemplum of the narrator’s occasional monism. Bolting her door, the narrator imagines herself at the centre of a fortress and endowed with the ‘right to choose which bodies will enter this special community and which bodies will be denied entrance.’<sup>86</sup> Yet, where the characters addressed in the previous chapter fail to reflect on their actions, the narrator almost immediately questions her statement by noting, ‘but that’s just it. Sometimes we root ourselves in limitations that seem relatively straightforward. The main difference is that if you never leave, you are always already here.’<sup>87</sup> Whilst oblique, her words appear to suggest that both physical *and* philosophical exploration, intuition and analysis, are essential if one wants to appreciate the shifting dynamics of everyday reality, and one’s place within it. At the same time, she seems to renounce the conflation of property, cultural inheritance and identity in favour of a more nomadic approach – one that understands place and subjectivity as imminent and irreducible to externalised meaning structures – and embraces the search.

It is perhaps symbolic, then, that on realising the ‘limitations’ of her setting, the narrator refuses her husband’s request to ‘sit in the dark in the midst of [her] failures,’ and migrates to the symbolically liminal space of the porch.<sup>88</sup> Here, she alternates between reading history books and memoirs that offer her alternative views of suburban streets, and watching the world for herself. The result of this endeavour is her growing recognition that suburbia is a complex collaboration of subjective sensation and objective fact, a series of co-habiting and often conflicting

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<sup>85</sup> Dutton, p.87.

<sup>86</sup> Dutton, p.103.

<sup>87</sup> Dutton, p.104.

<sup>88</sup> Dutton, p.104.

identities and discourses that combine to make up the character of a place.

‘Everything has two sides and sometimes a variety of others,’ she states.<sup>89</sup> ‘I walk through streets and look in windows to witness cheerfully painted walls and vertical lamps, high technical quality and surround-sound, mystery, beauty.’<sup>90</sup>

For the narrator, this represents a moment of philosophical clarity. For the increasingly sceptical reader, however, such oscillations provoke questions about the ontology of the narrator’s viewpoint and the potential limitations of her perception. Yet, this is not an autobiography, and the narrator is not the story’s only author. On the occasions when the narrator fails to recognise the dangers of excessive interiority, Dutton makes her more transcendent authorial presence known, challenging the narrator with almost magical and uncanny interventions. After seeing her face mirrored in the landscape, the narrator is confronted with a street plastered with newspaper cuttings of a ‘Today in History’ column. As she walks, she tramples over the fact that, ‘Today in History a colony of muskrats was discovered in a meadow. Today in History a house was demolished; a sergeant was killed in war.’ Whilst the situation is ‘too awkward [for the narrator] to realise what’s wrong,’ the reader has sufficient critical distance to recognise that the protagonist is being haunted by the social and environmental histories that she has momentarily refuted.<sup>91</sup> These historical narratives are not monolithic or intensely political. Nor do they contest the value of the narrator’s own subjective experience. Rather, the fragments of paper testify to the polyphonic, palimpsestic nature of the landscape, and implore the narrator to recognise herself as an important part of a continuum that does not merely extend across space, but across time.

In fact, the novel itself is full of intertextual echoes and alternative perspectives that the narrator does not always recognise, all of which come together to furnish an understanding of social reality as ‘unstable, contextual, relational and provisional.’<sup>92</sup> Whether intentionally or not, Dutton’s work offers implicit commentary on the differences between autobiography and experimental fiction, and the relative benefits

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<sup>89</sup> Dutton, p.69.

<sup>90</sup> Dutton, p.97.

<sup>91</sup> Dutton, p.115.

<sup>92</sup> Hutcheon, p.67. Dutton includes these inter-textual echoes self-consciously: many are listed in the Acknowledgements section.

of each. Following his analysis of the potential pitfalls of critical regionalism, Powell advocates striving for a sort of dual-consciousness which achieves both subjectivity and objectivity, empiricism and sociality, and which both analyses and produces representational strategies for imagining places. If one can somehow embrace this polyvocality and dynamism in one's writing, he muses, a text might be transformed into a site of exchange and debate, from which readers might glean myriad new perspectives on the similarly complex landscapes described. Though, of course, any single-authored work will always be partisan and reflexive, Dutton's refusal to invoke a world that is fixed according to a single order is a reminder that both place and personal identity are rarely precisely enclosed, but are instead transformed by the forces around them. In this respect, the novel has numerous rhizomatic qualities, committed to unearthing hidden flows, multiplicities and alliances, and dedicated to the logic of 'and.' Arguably, it also embodies a-signifying rupture, its sentences detachable from one another and conducive to rearrangements that will enable new significances and connections to emerge. Meanwhile, viewed through the interpretative framework of critical regionalism, *SPRAWL* might be said to display what architectural critic Kenneth Frampton calls a 'conjunctural' process of 'in-layering,' since it attends to 'many levels of significance [from] the prehistory of the place, its archaeological past and its subsequent cultivation and transformation across time' and 'opposes any effort to reduce or limit its capacity through narrow definition or "rootedness."'93

#### IV. The Politics of the Poetics of *SPRAWL*

Yet such work raises a series of difficult questions. The issue is not simply that Dutton invokes a narrator who is at liberty to experiment patiently with consumption of both materials and knowledge, but that Dutton herself veers dangerously close to re-inscribing a certain romance with rootlessness and pioneering expansionism in her suggestion that salvation comes from leaving home and 'explor[ing] out to the edge.'94 In fact, the novel seems to espouse mobility, innovation and improvisation – the tenets of neoliberal logic – in its very form. In *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (2011), Karen Tongson observes that

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<sup>93</sup> Frampton, p.21; p.26.

<sup>94</sup> Dutton, p.17.

Even as the suburbs were founded on class mobility and constant movement in the form of commutes, countercultures positioning themselves against suburbanisation revisited romantic and bohemian ideals about wanderlust to reclaim mobility for the spiritually depleted subject's sensational nourishment. [...] We might also construe this sensation-seeking mobility [...] as a form of spatial and cultural privilege that has since become de rigueur.<sup>95</sup>

Whilst not wishing to suggest that critical regionalist texts are deliberately complicit with neoliberal lifestyle imperatives, I agree with Tongson that there are intersections that 'make strange bedfellows of both neoliberal and progressive ideologies.'<sup>96</sup> And certainly, Dutton's refusal to name either the narrator or the town she describes could be interpreted as a universalisation of her experience.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that *SPRAWL* is an uncritical celebration of wild deterritorialisation, either as social practice or aesthetic form. In fact, Dutton foregrounds both her various attempts *and* failures to free 'suburbia' and 'sprawl' from the damaging cultural vocabulary so often used to define them. As the novel progresses, the narrator increasingly questions the authority of her sensory impressions, noting with reticence that she is 'explor[ing] what has already begun to recede: the world beneath [her] feet is a multiplicity of partial worlds' that she cannot possibly articulate, or even understand.<sup>97</sup> In this, she appears to speak not only of her own anxieties, but also of Dutton's, who, looking from a necessarily univocal perspective, can never hope to speak *for* suburbanites without partially reducing their experience. By depicting the absurd and destructive ways in which the narrator fills the 'many open spaces' outside with 'yellow roses, jellybeans,' or by 'pouring hot coffee into garden fountains,' Dutton implies that language will only ever reduce, contort or capture an approximation.<sup>98</sup> In moments of greater self-awareness, the narrator equates her linguistic endeavour to record the world with the

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<sup>95</sup> Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), p.32.

<sup>96</sup> Tongson, p.205.

<sup>97</sup> Dutton, p.121.

<sup>98</sup> Dutton, p.47.

privatisation of unclaimed space and the paving over of its palimpsestic histories. 'There's a spatial plunge behind the dark oaks on the edge of town,' she reveals. 'The mayor wants to shut it down or build a fence around it. "It's like a dead word," he tells us. It's rumoured all over town he cries in his sleep: "Wasted space!"'"<sup>99</sup> Where words are constantly at risk of being subsumed into a corporate logic, only silence offers true resistance. Later, she concedes, 'If I were to try to record an immediate impression of every lasting influence, I might find them in the gaps between lying and sentiment.'<sup>100</sup>

In fact, the effort it takes for the narrator to reject all totalising claims to place and identity, and to accept that the only truth is to keep on searching, is exhausting, and in refusing to adopt a 'static perception' of the world, she oscillates wildly between feelings of social utility and sensations of total unravelling.<sup>101</sup> Her dedication to bearing witness and clarifying all the emotions, images and ideas that swirl around her is, by turns, intensely pleasurable and deeply traumatic, leaving her feeling like she 'can't open bottles for whole days, or then can't get them closed [...can't] distil sections of [her] life [...and can't decide] which one to choose or how to tie it down.'<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, her reference to probing her 'smoothed-out-sense-of-self' calls to mind Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs: a nomadic assemblage with no underlying or organisational principles, which ties together all heterogeneous or disparate elements.<sup>103</sup> In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari claim that human beings are no more than desiring machines, plugged into a vast network of energy flows and in a constant state of production. Aside from the tangible casing of the body, therefore, there is no such thing as 'the self and the non-self, outside and inside;' each object is merely a partial flow in a greater whole.<sup>104</sup> In theory, the body without organs represents the ultimate freedom, since it permits the flows of energy and ideas to slide into and stream across its surface without physical obstruction. And yet, in being totally undifferentiated from the flows passing through it, and with no identity of its own, it must forgo both its ability to produce and its recognisable

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<sup>99</sup> Dutton, p.88.

<sup>100</sup> Dutton, p.105.

<sup>101</sup> Dutton, p.106.

<sup>102</sup> Dutton, p.110.

<sup>103</sup> Dutton, p.75.

<sup>104</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.2.



humanity. At times, Dutton's narrator cannot distinguish between her flow productions and diversions, and those producing her. Ironically, in her efforts to 'efface all other operations' in the hope that she 'may come to something important,' she risks becoming the feminine chora all over again, defined only by the external.<sup>105</sup>

By the end of the novel, Dutton has engaged and ultimately parodied or renounced almost every academic attempt to 'redeem' sprawl.<sup>106</sup> And yet, even as the novel admits to its own futility, the power of its language still comes through in its ambiguity: the reader is never sure whether the narrator is being ironic or sincere, and this uncertainty creates a fascinating gap between sign and signifier. Ultimately, her work is not polemical: it neither emphasises the need for a centralising political community, nor functions as a blueprint from a new literary or architectural paradigm. Her narrator is neither a heroine fighting a losing battle to forge community nor a blameless victim of social conspiracy: she too is frequently guilty of cultural ignorance, selfish individualism and moral superficiality. The fact that, after all her 'moral resistance to determinism [and...] confinement,' she admits that she still 'buys the things they sell and sort of wants to forget about it,' underlines the problematically 'tight connection between self-realisation and pure consumerism.'<sup>107</sup> Even the tenderly produced taxonomies and epistles of which the novel is largely composed come under fire: 'Will the best letters of our lifetime be published,' the narrator ponders, 'or will we store them in pretty boxes, in cool cellars, even the ones I especially like to read, as proof of the power of our ambition, our uncollaborative dedication?'<sup>108</sup> Yet it is precisely these flashes of wry cynicism that shatter any illusion that the novel is a vulgar celebration of everyday privilege or a reification of white subjectivity. Unlike Riding, Dutton does not endeavour to plumb the depths of an essential, unmediated self. In fact, even as Dutton encloses the reader within the narrator's consciousness, she refuses to unpack the identities of compliant wife,

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<sup>105</sup> Dutton, p.51.

<sup>106</sup> 'A lot of these dilemmas aren't ever solved; they're like rotting fruit concealed beneath their own sweet smell,' says the narrator, ambivalently invoking *SPRAWL*'s aesthetic flourishes as decaying decadence. Dutton, p.51.

<sup>107</sup> Dutton, p.91; p.118; Harvey, p.154.

<sup>108</sup> Dutton, p.72.

vehement consumer, avid reader, political activist and lazy cynic, to reveal an authentic core.<sup>109</sup>

Nevertheless, whilst the narrator seldom clarifies the meaning of her gestures and observations, her actions bespeak a growing curiosity with the environment outside her gates and a burgeoning sense of her responsibility within it: where the early pages of the novel are dominated by images of closed windows and drawn curtains, the latter pages are rich with allusions to listening, exploring and ‘staring at others with saucer-like eyes.’<sup>110</sup> It would appear that it is precisely her willingness to exchange purely *affective* responses for more critical perspectives – gleaned from the books she reads, the news she watches and the people with whom she engages – that motivates her to write to local politicians about their policies and proposals for change. ‘It’s like I can’t rest confident in the political circumstance of one small space,’ she marvels, as she begins to tune in to local ‘debates about public housing and how to shift responsibility for the poor,’ and her desire to intervene grows.<sup>111</sup> In the earliest pages, her writing is filled with emotional hyperbole and ill-informed cliché: in a letter to a friend, she declares, ‘I can’t seem to say what I mean [...] but with some urgency I mean to inform you what a triumph the big city has become. I am a secular individual but even I can feel the shift in the horizon utterly alien to the constitution of things, the habitual.’<sup>112</sup> It is only later, once she has walked the streets themselves, with their ‘restaurants and shopping malls, fry pits, carpet warehouses, parking lots,’ and poured over local history, that she is able to convey something more profound: ‘What is buried in our thoughts is self-evolving. Out there is a continuity of something; it is secretly allowed to cross borders and nations.’<sup>113</sup> Her phenomenological taxonomies, meanwhile, become infinitely more expansive, whilst retaining their ‘local’ and affective significance: ‘We move on wheels through dusty streets, with hooks, trains, representative politics, satin pyjamas, fur coats, deluxe toasters, and an appetite for soap and colonial-style lampposts. We push out,

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<sup>109</sup> ‘I am all sorts of things in themselves,’ claims the narrator. Dutton, p.35. At times, she toys with the reader’s desire for clarity: ‘Maybe I’m possessed by some new ideal, to preserve historical patterns and boundaries, or be merely decorative.’ Dutton, p.54.

<sup>110</sup> Dutton, p.12.

<sup>111</sup> Dutton, p.98; p.97.

<sup>112</sup> Dutton, p.6.

<sup>113</sup> Dutton, p.35; p.100.

comprising bulk, veins, lanes, migration, and a large selection of signs, or someone pushes in, importing trees and exotic plants.’<sup>114</sup>

In Dutton’s experimental work, the sprawl of the title emerges not merely as an expression of the narrator’s dynamic setting, but as a declaration of the novel’s own mutability. On one hand, with its voracious citations of literary sources and less tangible inter-textual echoes, the novel sparks a new and invigorating discourse with, and between, the literatures of the past. Similarly, Dutton invokes a sort of first-person plural narrator, who interrupts and contradicts herself at every opportunity. The most important conversation of all, however, is the one that takes place between the novel and its reader. By weaving readers into the very fabric of the novel, as both named *and* implied recipients of the letters that the narrator sends out, Dutton creates a contextual network that extends far beyond the novel’s pages. Throughout, the narrator implores us to ‘read between the lines.’<sup>115</sup> In a novel in which sentences often appear unrelated to one another, such a request for curiosity and perseverance is crucial. It is also a valuable reminder that the author is not to be considered the ‘unique and originating source of final and authoritative meaning,’ but is rather part of a larger process of ongoing cultural production.<sup>116</sup> Though, of course, any novel that makes its way into a reader’s hands will be something of a fixed product, Dutton’s refusal to invoke coherent, non-contradictory subjects and settings, or single interpretative frameworks, transforms the reader into a collaborator and reinserts the work into the context of ongoing social relations. In doing so, she goes some way towards recovering community as the work of reading fiction.

At the same time, for all the narrator’s pretensions of writing an autobiography, *SPRAWL* is *not* a stream of consciousness, but a mediated text whose author offers pointers – in the form of a bibliographic acknowledgements section – for how best to navigate it. Even as it invokes geographical and ideological deterritorialisation, the novel is replete with references to webs, tangled roots and ‘previously unapprehended relationships.’<sup>117</sup> Dotted with recurring motifs – an aerial

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<sup>114</sup> Dutton, p.34.

<sup>115</sup> Dutton, p.13

<sup>116</sup> Hutcheon, p.77.

<sup>117</sup> Dutton, p.17.

photograph, an open window – that rise up like ‘challenge[s] to the mist,’ the landscape emerges as simultaneously whole and fragmented, real and imagined.<sup>118</sup> Perhaps, therefore, the repeated refrain – ‘prepare to merge!’ – is not a dirge to the loss of selfhood and place identity in an era of simultaneous and chaotic decentralisation and homogenisation, but an appeal for multiple, more inclusive ‘lines of articulation.’<sup>119</sup> Perhaps, too, it signals the coming together of objectivity and subjectivity, complicity and criticism, insider and outsider status, within the space of the novel, in an attempt to enact all ‘the contradictions inherent in any transitional moment.’<sup>120</sup>

In *World City* (2007), Massey writes,

There has been much consideration of the internal multiplicities, the decenterings, the fragmentations of identity and so forth. And such arguments have been important theoretically and politically in grappling with issues, for instance, of essentialism. [...] There is, however, another side to the geography of the relational construction of identity, of a global sense of place. For there are also the relations that run outwards, the wider geographies through which identities are constituted. The strangers that remain without the gates. [...] It raises the necessity for a wider, distantiated, politics of place.<sup>121</sup>

Though focussed, ostensibly, on precisely the internal multiplicities that Massey describes, *SPRAWL* does not simply reject a global sense of place in favour of a rooted, inward-looking or essentialist history. Throughout, its local stories and experiences are interwoven with both national and international history, and processes of socio-spatial change, whether the narrator chooses to acknowledge them or not. It would be a mistake, therefore, to conclude that it merely weaves new stories around existing compass points, or that its dissection of white alienation, female repression and spiritual ‘home’-making furthers the notion of a single cultural

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<sup>118</sup> Dutton, p.8.

<sup>119</sup> Dutton, p.97; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.3.

<sup>120</sup> Hutcheon, p.67.

<sup>121</sup> Massey, *World City*, p.179.

experience. Nevertheless, in the end, the narrator is depicted as having the opportunity to combine mobility and rest within a mostly stable environment, and the novel closes with her performing a yoga move on her front lawn with her solitude undisturbed.

In part two of this chapter, I turn to a novel that strives to balance the need for a certain rootedness and permanence with a reverence for the various routes of migration and networks of intercultural exchange that criss-cross the United States, and that animate different – though no less valid – conceptualisations of identity and home-making. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Paul Gilroy champions the foregrounding of ‘in- and out-flowing dialogic and diasporic histories and traditions [...] in the transnational comprehension of the west as part of a larger global mobility of peoples and ideas.’<sup>122</sup> His larger project of uprooting fixed notions of black identity has implications for this project’s desire to problematise fixed conceptualisations of U.S. culture and identity. Through a focus on the processes of ‘movement and mediation,’ Gilroy gestures towards a more complex definition of place and identity as ‘neither fixed essence or [...] a vague and utterly contingent construction reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists and language gamers.’<sup>123</sup> Crucially, in his conceptualisation – as in Yamashita’s – attending to these complexities is not deconstructive, but fundamentally *productive* of new opportunities for both difference and affiliation.

### **3.2. Transnational Politics and Aesthetics in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (1997)**

According to Tim Foster, ‘more immigrants entered America in the 1990s than in any previous decade in American history. [...] Of these new arrivals, a majority settled in metropolitan destinations outside of the central city in a trend that grew more apparent over the course of the decade.’<sup>124</sup> This diversification has had an inevitable impact upon the suburban imaginary, eroding models of American identity

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<sup>122</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 2002), as paraphrased by Neil Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), p.25.

<sup>123</sup> Gilroy, p.102, as qtd. by Campbell, p.25.

<sup>124</sup> Foster, p.28.

predicated on territorial and ethnic boundaries. Novels and short stories such as T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1996), Junot Diaz's *Drown* (1996), Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997), Chang-Rae Lee's *Aloft* (2004) and Alicia Erian's *Towelhead* (2005), not only introduce immigrant communities into the suburbs, but also attend to their various traumas of subordination, ghettoization and assimilation in environments so dependent upon an aspirational 'whiteness.'<sup>125</sup> In doing so, they help to expose that whiteness as both socially constructed and contingent.

In *The Tortilla Curtain*, the life of white suburbanite Delaney Mossbacher is ultimately saved by the immigrant that he had abused and despised, and the reader is left with a faint glimmer of hope – amidst environmental devastation – that this event will act as an equaliser, affirming the pair's co-dependence and the entanglement of their fates. Yet this scenario, which effectively materialises Kristeva's exhortation to welcome Otherness in society as a means of better understanding the self, skirts dangerously close to invoking 'whiteness' as 'dependent on the redemptive contact with the non-white as it constitutes itself meaningfully only through a dialectic of self and other.'<sup>126</sup> Indeed, it arguably *maintains* the normative associations of whiteness with certain territories and cultural contexts, and inadvertently charges immigrant 'interlopers' with fortifying those associations, even as they are 'sent in' to problematise them. Certainly, in Boyle's fiction, it is the white male who is resolutely centre-stage. Meanwhile, as Heike Paul notes, the novel's immigrant characters remain either poorly differentiated, or are forced to 'bear the burden of representing all that is 'wrong' with a highly self-centered and narcissistic white American Southwest microcosm.'<sup>127</sup> The pregnant América, for example, is almost entirely constructed by others, transformed by both white and Mexican patriarchs

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<sup>125</sup> In *American Pastoral*, for example, total assimilation is equated with subordination. In his attempts to adhere to a notion of suburbia as a space built upon cooperation and the eradication of difference, Swede Levov carries out a violent Othering of aspects of his identity, including his Jewishness. Through Merry – his violent progeny – he is forced to contemplate the Other within himself. For, despite his attempts to produce a fully assimilated, 'post-Catholic, post-Jewish' (p.73) American child, Merry ends up closer to the Jewish Heritage and the Polish ghetto than any Levov has been for generations. Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (London: Vintage, 2011).

<sup>126</sup> Heike Paul, 'Old, New and "Neo" Immigrant Fictions in American Literature: The Immigrant Presence in David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars* and T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*,' *American Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2001), pp.249-265, p.257.

<sup>127</sup> Paul, p.259.

into a figure of national allegorical significance. Furthermore, both América and her husband Candido are problematically equated throughout with a sort of primal sensuality and exoticism that contrasts sharply with Kyra and Delaney's dispassionate, but highly evolved, consumerist existence.

Thus, although Boyle dramatises the ways in which Los Angeles' immigrant bodies are often simultaneously relied-upon and abused, in ways that I will define, he ends up co-opting these bodies all over again to perform a certain kind of cultural labour. The categories of white American and ethnic Other are challenged but ultimately re-affirmed. In other words, *The Tortilla Curtain* opts to define personal and place identity by relying on an Other that must remain indefinitely 'homeless.' Its migrant characters want nothing more than to pursue American national citizenship and the dream of upward mobility that accompanies it, and their lives are defined almost exclusively by the pleasures and traumas of this pursuit. What it does not do is challenge the very categories by which identity and belonging are judged. In *Towelhead* and *Aloft*, meanwhile, middle-class immigrants living in affluent suburbs experience small-scale dramas of assimilation before learning to confront their alienation and self-pity in ways strikingly reminiscent of Cheever and Updike's everymen before them. In the end, they succumb to a form of celebratory multiculturalism that side-lines the problems of presupposing essential links between geography and identity.

In practice, migration is neither entirely bound up with notions of exile from an imagined homeland, nor exclusively affiliated with the search for a promised land of opportunity, with progressive Americanisation as its goal. In the following sections, I consider the extent to which Los Angeles, with its unique spatiality and complex geo-political and cultural history, confounds easy distinctions between coloniser and colonised, dominant and marginal, host and migrant, not only staging a series of oscillations between them, but also creating a thirdspace within which new forms of identity, being and belonging might emerge. In Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, the sprawling Los Angeles is not the final destination on a one-way voyage for immigrants, but a transnational spatiality – a point of interethnic and intercultural contact within a much larger network – whose meaning is mutable and contingent. The immigrant communities that move within it, meanwhile, do not correspond with

any one single cultural, political, economic or social interest or affiliation. In Yamashita's Los Angeles, just as in Gilroy's west, the 'straight line (road, frontier, grid, linear history and narrative, monologue) is disrupted by the trope of crossing (dialogue, diaspora, rhizome, the fold) in a revisionary process' replete with 'untidy elements in a story of hybridisation and intermixture that inevitably disappoints the desire for cultural and therefore racial purity.'<sup>128</sup>

### **I. 'Polycentric, polarised, polyglot:' Los Angeles as Thirdspace**

In *Thirdspace*, Soja evokes Los Angeles – a vast, low-density metropolis known for its ethnic diversity, economic disparity, success stories and social unrest – as a paradox that confounds conventional theorisations of urban spatiality by 'imploding and exploding simultaneously, turning everyday urban life inside-out and outside-in at the same time and in the same places.' This is a site, he claims, in which people, objects, forces and ideas from around the globe circulate and converge, transforming the 'local and the particular' into the 'simultaneously global and generalizable.' Meanwhile, nature and human nature are intersecting in new and often devastating ways, and reality and the already-polarised images of urban utopias and dystopian nightmares are colliding and fragmenting. For Soja, no longer is it possible – if it ever was – to map the city and its limits according to objective coordinates or collective reference points, and 'increasingly unconventional modes of exploring Los Angeles are needed to make practical and theoretical sense of its contemporary urban realities – and hyper-realities.'<sup>129</sup>

In fact, Los Angeles has long been a peculiarly liminal spatiality, both a metaphor and example of cross-cultural contact. Conquered by the Spanish in the 1540s, it continued to be shaped by complex combinations of European colonisation, U.S. territorial expansion and global migration. In the late nineteenth century, L.A. was marketed by boosters as an American Eden, an idyllic, sun-kissed and uniquely 'non-urban' refuge from the industrial cities and racial conflicts of the East, replete with communities based on lifestyle needs. And indeed, the diversity of L.A.'s historical and ongoing migrations, and the fact that its growth has been based on varied

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<sup>128</sup> Gilroy, p.41, as qtd. by Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West*, p.28.

<sup>129</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), p.17.



financial sectors, has created discrete cultural zones within the landscape. Yet to refer to it as ‘sixty suburbs in search of a city’ – as so many did during the 1960s – is not entirely accurate.<sup>130</sup> Neither is its sprawl the antithesis of planned, core-periphery urban development. In fact, from the 1930s onwards, Southern California developed according to a series of ethically dubious, highly political master plans, with pro-business alliances advocating for federal assistance to replace old public housing in poorer neighbourhoods with private development; this was a move that not only destroyed coherent communities and separated Mexican-American families, but also contributed to their demonisation and racialisation. Its profit-hungry, heavily subsidised speculators did little to integrate green or public space into their rapidly constructed residential visions, and frequently built on unstable land.

By the 1950s – the decade that saw the last significant construction of public housing – L.A. was highly segregated.<sup>131</sup> However, it was not until the 1990s that its racial demographics underwent massive shifts. As American manufacturing began to relocate to other regions and then abroad, L.A. lost a third of its industrial job base, and extreme poverty doubled.<sup>132</sup> At the same time, the low-wage sector grew, and businesses began employing non-unionised, and often illegal, Latino immigrant labour en-masse. In its efforts to open its economies to trade, the U.S. strengthened its links with other countries and created conditions that galvanised migration. Not only was the ‘local’ becoming more ‘global,’ but the suburbs were also becoming more urban, in terms of their increasingly culturally, economically and ethnically heterogeneous populations and diverse economies. Since L.A.’s business and tourist sectors required everything from office-cleaning to restaurant services, low-wage immigrants from less developed countries often lived in enclaves alongside predominantly white communities, confounding traditional centre-periphery patterns of racial and class segregation. By the close of the century, most immigrants were bypassing the metropolitan core altogether and settling in the suburbs. And yet, even

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<sup>130</sup> Edward W. Soja, ‘Los Angeles, 1965-1992: From Crisis-Generated Restructuring to Restructuring-Generated Crisis,’ *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Edward W. Soja and Allen J. Scott (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp.426-462, p.428.

<sup>131</sup> Edward W. Soja and Allen J. Scott, ‘Introduction to Los Angeles: City and Region,’ *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Edward W. Soja and Allen J. Scott (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp.1-21, p.10.

<sup>132</sup> According to Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 2006), p.xiii.

as these processes transformed L.A.'s material form, there was little in the way of pluralist integration. As the population grew and diversified, Los Angeles became ever more wildly stratified.

'Amidst a sea of shifting relations between space,' social, political and economic processes of reterritorialisation were fortifying the divisions between the predominantly white rich and the predominantly non-white disenfranchised.<sup>133</sup> In 1994, a ballot initiative called Proposition 187 was presented to prohibit illegal immigrants from accessing social services, ranging from public education to healthcare. Though eventually found to be unconstitutional, it was initially voted in by a 59% majority. This astounding hypocrisy was testament to a NIMBYish desire for cheap labour and the cultural and economic benefits of racial and ethnic diversity without the social responsibility of accommodating it nearby. Such defensive localism and the hoarding of resources was reflected in spatial forms and homeowner politics throughout Los Angeles. In 1990, Mike Davis invoked L.A. as something of a 'carceral archipelago' of atomised gated communities, exclusive and mono-functional spaces, informal politics, and privatised police surveillance.<sup>134</sup> Forced into the cracks was a mobile labour force of unassimilated immigrants faced with extreme poverty and homelessness.

This paradoxical union of exclusion and co-dependency, linking and dividing, was mirrored on an international scale with the 1992 signing of NAFTA, an agreement that opened economic borders to trade whilst exploiting the Mexican economy, and which sought boundless access to labour whilst generating strict immigration policies and the militarisation of the Mexican-American border.<sup>135</sup> The agreement may have been promoted with a rhetoric of global freedom and transnational convergence, but the main beneficiaries were private, U.S.-based or U.S. subsidised corporations. As immigrants crossed the border in the hope of improving their economic situation, a racist discourse criminalised the very workers that helped to keep the U.S. economy afloat. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Los Angeles

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<sup>133</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p.216.

<sup>134</sup> Soja, analysing Davis' *City of Quartz* in *Postmetropolis*, p.299.

<sup>135</sup> The U.S. launched Operation Gatekeeper the same year that NAFTA was enacted.

experienced catastrophes ranging from landslides to race riots, as the city's extreme weather collided with poor urban planning and its juxtaposed communities of wealth and desolation came into violent contact. Immigrants – whose carbon footprint was statistically the smallest – frequently became the scapegoats for L.A.'s myriad problems with congestion, pollution and declining social mobility.

A brief analysis of Los Angeles' structural realities, networks of interdependency, and social, spatial and political practices reveals seismic de- and re-territorialisations taking place at local, national and international levels. Even as the rationalisation of the globalisation process continued to break *down* barriers to trade, producing new flows of bodies, cultures and systems of power, it both directly and indirectly enhanced economic stratification, galvanised racial antagonisms and privatisation, shored up long-established socio-political hierarchies and territorial boundaries and contributed to environmental catastrophes.<sup>136</sup> David Harvey notes that whilst 'neoliberal economic theories assume a world of deracinated men and women; producers and consumers; buyers and sellers,' the linking of markets virtually *depended* on the multiplication of frontiers and racialised restrictions.<sup>137</sup> Accordingly, any recourse to an either/or logic, or to monologic visions of space and history, is both facile and dangerously obfuscating.

Located at the frontier between the U.S. and Mexico, and full of unstable geographies and shifting social and economic dynamics, L.A. is not simply a border zone but a transnational socio-cultural space. In *Postmetropolis*, Soja criticises both Joel Garreau – who imagines L.A. as a harbinger of the 'edge city,' a mobile, decentred locus of democratic opportunity and multiculturalism – and Mike Davis – who posits it as a hell-hole, beaten to a pulp by the 'all-powerful right arm' of neoliberalism.<sup>138</sup> Davis is accused of essentially waiting for an apocalypse, shutting himself off from 'the new cultural politics and the most insightful feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern critiques, subsuming patriarchy, racism, and explicitly spatial politics into a mixture of radical rage and conventional Marxian

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<sup>136</sup> See Soja, *Postmetropolis*, p.216 for a fuller analysis of this paradox.

<sup>137</sup> David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p.64.

<sup>138</sup> Soja, *Postmetropolis*, p.302.

essentialism.’<sup>139</sup> For Soja, Los Angeles – like every urban space – contains both liberating and oppressive forces, and one must avoid succumbing to ideological closure when appraising it. Opportunities for altering the existing structure will only emerge by ‘*maintaining* this multiplicity of positions’ and embracing ‘several different standpoints simultaneously,’ thereby redirecting attention to the myriad, interactive processes that produce space rather than simply to the local or global outcomes.<sup>140</sup> To do so, he claims, we need radical postmodernist perspectives that dramatise these multiple contexts, linking localised cases to larger histories, systems and geographies.

## II. The HyperContexts of *Tropic of Orange*

The remainder of this chapter turns to Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* to appraise its evocation of the dense socio-political networks of experience in Los Angeles’ border regions. Interestingly, Yamashita reconsiders L.A.’s material histories, cultural criticisms, transcontinental migrations and legacies of imperial strife through a magical realist lens rarely associated with either postmodernism or North American fiction. Here, angels walk amongst the living and an ancient, Latin-American everyman wrestles with the personification of NAFTA. Meanwhile, the novel itself has an encyclopaedic quality – drawing on genres as diverse as postmodern satire, disaster fiction and noir – and lends itself to numerous non-linear readings. All the while, it speaks in the characters’ diverse voices: Japanese-American Emi is given to pithy TV-speak, and derides multiculturalism; Mexican-American journalist Gabriel narrates his side of the story in what Amy C. Tang calls the ‘first-person voice of Raymond Chandler’s hardboiled fiction’ and is prone to dubious cultural essentialisms; Buzzworm, an African-American social worker living in East L.A. is apt at communicating with disenfranchised youngsters from a range of socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds; Manzanar, a mysterious, homeless Japanese-American man, conducts ‘symphonies’ from the overpass of the Harbour freeway as the flow of humanity surges beneath him.<sup>141</sup> Crucially, these voices remain distinct even as they

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<sup>139</sup> Soja, *Postmetropolis*, p.303. Davis’ *Ecology of Fear* concludes with the words, ‘Seen from space, the city that once hallucinated itself as an endless future without natural limits or social constraints now dazzles observers with the eerie beauty of an erupting volcano.’ Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (London: Picador, 1999), p.422.

<sup>140</sup> Soja and Scott, ‘Introduction to Los Angeles: City and Region,’ p.2.

<sup>141</sup> Emi’s derision of multiculturalism is demonstrated by her response to a woman who claims to ‘adore different cultures and love living in L.A. because [she] can find anything in the world to eat’ –

co-exist within the same spatial register and echo through one another's lives, and Yamashita oscillates between characters and genres with equal reverence and humour. In doing so, she disrupts linear, univocal and closed narratives of global capitalist progress, and refuses to identify a single national or ethnic subject. At the same time, she transcends former associations of certain genres with specific ethnicities or national origins, and creates a hybrid, decentred, intertextual space that mirrors the layers of settlement that have accrued in a mutable Los Angeles.

Yamashita refers to *Tropic of Orange*'s structure as HyperContextual, a word designed to convey its grounding of hypertextually linked events, narratives and genres in specific spatial and historical contexts. The contents page, which appears in the form of a grid, places the days of the week on the horizontal axis and the seven characters on the vertical axis. Most of the forty-nine chapters have titles that detail the specific location in which the action takes place, whilst the subheadings beneath define the characters according to certain, interlinked themes. These excessive linkages and proliferating references make explicit the links between the text and the space and history of Los Angeles and beyond. More interesting, though, is the fact that the novel meditates self-reflexively on the very construction and representation of contexts throughout. Not only is it shot through with references to other narratives and art forms, but each of the characters actively considers him or herself to be a storyteller too, working within a distinct genre. Where TV producer Emi is eager for sensationalist stories that reinforce the status quo, and naïve Gabriel sees himself as a hard-hitting journalist of the mainstream press, Buzzworm considers story-telling to be a communal activity, and spends his time spreading oral histories in the racially segregated streets of East L.A. Impoverished immigrant Bobby, meanwhile, is certain that he 'don't have time to tell stories' because he is too busy pursuing the freedom of the American Dream, another 'story' that he later acknowledges has kept him pliant.<sup>142</sup> Besides Buzzworm, conductor Manzanar and mythical, Latin-American Archangel offer the most striking counter-narratives to Bobby's internalised rhetoric of neoliberal progress. Whilst Archangel carries with him a

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a claim that ignores ongoing racialised oppression. Emi declares that 'cultural diversity is bullshit.' Yamashita, p.128; Amy C. Tang, *Repetition and Race: Asian American Literature After Multiculturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.85.

<sup>142</sup> Yamashita, p.15.

travelling history of myriad sites of suffering and environmental damage, Manzanar synthesises the contemporary story of Los Angeles from the freeway, recycling the sounds that he hears and weaving them together with the history and geography of the entire Pacific Rim. By metafictionally foregrounding the process and purpose of storytelling, the novel emphasises the ways in which contexts and stories ‘work to influence our political and aesthetic choices.’<sup>143</sup>

Arguably, none are entirely sufficient alone: some spatialise and some historicise Los Angeles. Noting the many ways in which his suburban community has been defined – according to racial demographics, schools, voter registration and property ownership – Buzzworm muses that if only ‘someone could put down all the layers of the real map, maybe he could get the real picture.’<sup>144</sup> Though, as I will discuss, Manzanar’s musical score comes closest to linking all the spatial and historical layers that make up any single locus, his recycling of sound does not have the grassroots impact of Buzzworm’s face-to-face work. Allowed to resonate, constitute and challenge one another, however, these myriad stories make it almost impossible for historical amnesia to reassert itself, and demonstrate that local phenomena are directly connected to broader historical and spatial patterns. Taken together, they illustrate the importance of both grassroots coalitions and imagined cross-cultural alliances in conceiving more ethical spatial formations. In reconceiving ‘multiculturalism as multicentricity,’ stressing the importance of ‘intracommunity negotiations, municipal political interventions, and institutional organisation,’ Yamashita arguably provides what writer Michael Nevin Willard refers to elsewhere as ‘a theoretical framework for cultural analysis that departs from a centre/margin model of identity formation in the same way that the L.A. School of urban theory departs from a core/periphery model of urbanism.’<sup>145</sup>

### III. Global Oppressions, Grassroots Resistance

In this section, I trace several of the spatially and temporally interlinked oppressions that Yamashita foregrounds, and argue that her attention to Los Angeles’

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<sup>143</sup> Harrison, p.254-255.

<sup>144</sup> Yamashita, p.81.

<sup>145</sup> Michael Nevin Willard, ‘Nuestra Los Angeles,’ *Los Angeles and the Future of Urban Cultures (A Special Edition of American Quarterly)*, ed. by Raúl Homero Villa and George J. Sánchez, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp.309-345, p.331.

marginalised spaces and minority histories emphasises the perils of univocal ‘solutions’ to structural injustice. *Tropic of Orange* begins with one character’s misguided nostalgia for a pre-globalised past: it opens in Mexico, in the dilapidated house bought by Mexican-American Gabriel Balboa in a ‘spontaneous, sudden’ fit of ‘passion for the acquisition of land, the sensation of a timeless vacation, the erotic tastes of chili pepper.’<sup>146</sup> Part of the appeal is that the Tropic of Cancer dissects the property, ‘like a good metaphor’ for his own straddling of cultural divides. Yet Gabriel has never felt that he truly belongs here.<sup>147</sup> Though his grandparents were born in this small town, no one remembers them, and the few Mexican workers with whom he interacts tend to exploit his naivety. Nor does he really fit the stereotypical ‘Chicano’ model in Los Angeles: his partner, Emi, is vaguely disappointed to discover that ‘except for maybe his interest in tango (and even that was academic), he wasn’t what you call the stereotype.’<sup>148</sup> In Mexico, his attempts to carve out a utopian getaway are infected with nostalgia and exoticism. Every time he visits, he plants trees that can barely survive in this climate, and the only one that has produced fruit is the navel orange tree that marks the invisible line of the Tropic. Like Gabriel himself, the orange is ‘a hybrid,’ imported from California, and before that, Brazil; it is a product of globalisation that survives because global warming has stimulated an early blossom. His Mexican housekeeper, Rafaela, views it as an orange that ‘should not have been.’<sup>149</sup>

In fact, on Gabriel’s property, nothing is where it should be, and the distinctions between the natural, the normative and the magical are constantly being strained. Every morning, Rafaela is shocked to find dead crabs – hundreds of miles from the coast – amidst the insect carcasses that she must sweep onto the porch. Meanwhile, plants choke and erode the walls that Gabriel has constructed to mark his territory, and neighbours come and go as they please. Rafaela is convinced that this flexibility has something to do with the ‘aberrant orange’ that materialises the mobility of global capital.<sup>150</sup> And as Mitchum Huehls notes, when the orange finally falls from the tree and rolls to a ‘neutral place’ between Gabriel’s property and the highway –

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<sup>146</sup> Yamashita, p.5.

<sup>147</sup> Yamashita, p.5.

<sup>148</sup> Yamashita, p.21; p.19.

<sup>149</sup> Yamashita, p.11.

<sup>150</sup> Yamashita, p.11.

carrying with it an almost-invisible thread – it detaches from both the ‘natural’ laws of the Tropic of Cancer and the ‘normative’ laws of private property, and creates a new boundary line: the conceptually and geographically fluid Tropic of Orange.<sup>151</sup> When an elderly man picks up the orange and carries it to Los Angeles, he inadvertently drags the entire southern hemisphere and thousands of its inhabitants with him, starting a process that transforms the geography of North America, unsettles all conventional claims to territory, introduces alternative histories and creates opportunities for new configurations of space. In fact, the journey it makes mirrors the route taken by the parent navel orange tree that still stands, withered and water-starved, in Riverside, Los Angeles. Having passed through the hands of numerous ‘indigenous peoples, colonial explorers, and missionaries until the 1820s,’ the strain eventually mutated in a Sao Salvador grove and ended up in L.A., in an area has long been something of a gateway for immigrants migrating from all corners of the globe.<sup>152</sup> With the orange – already a mediator between north and south – Yamashita literalises the transformation of Los Angeles into a symbolic thirdspace.

Of course, Los Angeles has always been a point of intercultural contact, and long before Archangel arrives with his errant orange, the reader is confronted with a chaotic, layered geography of migrant workers and the racialised homeless, feel-good multiculturalists and hard-line racists, beneficiaries of globalisation and its many casualties. The first person the reader encounters is impossible to essentialise. ‘Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown,’ labourer Bobby has not stopped working, moving, ‘Building up. Tearing down. Fixing up. Cleaning up. Keeping up,’ since he arrived.<sup>153</sup> Bobby has read all about Proposition 187 and understands that he must render himself virtually invisible to survive. Echoing the logic of neoliberal competition, he ‘lives only for himself,’ refusing to unionise lest it jeopardise his position, and competing with the equally disenfranchised for food, shelter and clothing.<sup>154</sup> In fact, Bobby does have

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<sup>151</sup> Yamashita, p.13. See pp.71-80 of Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) for a fascinating exploration of how ‘the tropic of orange demarcates a “neutral place” beyond natural and normative boundaries, beyond the mutually exclusive relationship between public and private space.’ Huehls, pp.72-3.

<sup>152</sup> Tongson, p.112.

<sup>153</sup> Yamashita, p.15; p.79.

<sup>154</sup> Yamashita, p.16.



familial ties and duties of care to others, but his Mexican wife, Rafaela, and son, Sol, are hundreds of miles away in Mexico – having fled Bobby’s relentless work ethic – and his elderly father, to whom he sends money, is back in Singapore. For all Bobby’s claims to autonomy and personal empowerment, he is trapped in a double bind, and is desperately isolated.

According to bell hooks, when groups are subjugated, it tends to be because they have been denied the opportunity of constructing a home or community through deliberate processes of economic or social oppression. ‘For when people no longer have the space to construct homeplace,’ she argues, they ‘cannot build a meaningful community of resistance.’<sup>155</sup> hooks’ observation finds expression throughout Yamashita’s novel in her representation of the experience of diverse communities of colour. In chapter 13, urban wanderer Buzzworm addresses the master-planned disenfranchisement that has gradually destroyed the hood in which he was born. Though promising that the proposed freeway extension would be limited, politicians then ‘[broke] down the overpass crossing the freeway,’ deliberately ensured the vacated houses were ‘left to be broken into and tagged’ and turned a blind eye to prostitution and drug-pushing, until the entire area became isolated, inhospitable for those that remained and ripe for demolition.<sup>156</sup> Douglas Reichart Powell notes that powerful interests frequently ‘identify places as trashy, as waste and hence wasted space, and use that cultural identification as a rationale to [...create] potentially fatal toxic environments.’<sup>157</sup> In a metropolis so heavily defined by its roads, such areas can be rendered practically invisible to commuter’s eyes. When Buzzworm is taken for a ride on the freeway one afternoon, he realises that ‘you could just skip out over his house, his streets, his part of town. You never had to see it.’<sup>158</sup>

For other individuals in Yamashita’s Los Angeles, corralled into perilous, polluted and environmentally unstable spaces from the outset, ‘home’ is a death trap. Interestingly, it is another orange that finally brings these waste communities into view. News of the catastrophic freeway crash – which causes two trucks to jack-

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<sup>155</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Routledge, 2015), p.61.

<sup>156</sup> Yamashita, p.83.

<sup>157</sup> Powell, p.82.

<sup>158</sup> Yamashita, p.33.

knife at different points on the Harbour downtown, trapping hundreds of vehicles in between – trickles down to the characters through rumour and sensationalist new reporting. Emi has heard that a driver careened across two lanes after ingesting a piece of orange laced with cocaine. If this is true, it means that the orange is another aberrant ‘product of globalisation,’ used to sneak drugs across borders, and the crash is a contingency of capitalism with a traceable cause.<sup>159</sup> More interesting than the crash itself, however, is the rejection of capitalist norms that follows. As commuters abandon their cars and petrol spillages light the surrounding bush on fire, hundreds of homeless individuals descend from invisible encampments in the surrounding hills to take up residence in the vehicles left behind. These are the surplus labour army, ‘the daily hires’ normally glimpsed ‘hugging their knees on the backs of pickup trucks. [...] Now, for a scant moment in history, the poor looked out those same cars.’<sup>160</sup> Within minutes, ‘life filled a vacuum, reorganizing itself in predictable and unpredictable ways.’<sup>161</sup> Watching all of this from an overpass, Manzanar Murakami notes that whilst, ‘occasional disputes over claims to territory arose,’ there were ‘more than sufficient vehicles to accommodate this game of musical chairs. Indeed, it was a game, a fortunate lottery, and for the transient, understandably impermanent and immediate.’<sup>162</sup>

In the final chapter of *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues that, for disenfranchised groups and classes to ‘constitute themselves, or recognize one another, as subjects,’ they must ‘generate (or produce) a space.’<sup>163</sup> Though aware that most can only ever hope to appropriate spaces temporarily, he claims that passing the ‘trial by space’ requires a remapping of the ‘long-lived morphologies’ that buttress ‘antiquated ideologies and representations.’<sup>164</sup> Earlier in the text, he imagines the freeway – ostensibly a ‘public’ space – as an irrevocably dominated

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<sup>159</sup> Huehls, p.74. According to Huehls, ‘*Tropic of Orange* [...] doesn’t identify conspiracies of capital as much as it does contingencies of capital, suggesting that such contingencies are activated by unassuming objects like oranges.’ Huehls, p.73. Although several characters expound conspiracy theories about the orange – and its connections to a broader mystery about baby organ smuggling – a universal plot is never uncovered, and investigative journalist Gabriel Balboa eventually stops looking ‘for a resolution to the loose threads hanging off [his] storylines.’ Yamashita, p.248.

<sup>160</sup> Yamashita, p.238.

<sup>161</sup> Yamashita, p.121.

<sup>162</sup> Yamashita, p.121.

<sup>163</sup> Lefebvre, p.416.

<sup>164</sup> Lefebvre, p.417.

space: empty, sterilised, and cruelly efficient. 'A motorway brutalises the countryside and the land, slicing through space like a great knife,' he writes.<sup>165</sup> And these are merely the external signs of its hegemony. It also embodies obedience, mobility and progress at all costs, and prioritises the mobility of wealthy commuters over the needs of the low-income neighbourhoods nearby. The fact that it is *here* that the racialised, demonised homeless succeed in a radical occupation is thus all the more significant, revealing 'the ability of even loose or temporary coalitions to radically change the way we perceive urban space.'<sup>166</sup>

For a short time, the freeway that represents the endless flow of labour and capital is repurposed as a rooted space that fosters the emergence of horizontal affiliations, with the homeless 'creating a community out of a traffic jam,' singing, giving names to the lanes and sharing the resources they find.<sup>167</sup> Meanwhile, the cars – once valued as symbols of wealth and status – become functional spaces whose exchange value and aesthetic condition are 'deemed of secondary importance.'<sup>168</sup> In time, African-Americans from the disenfranchised local neighbourhoods and Latin-American immigrants from the nearby border-zone come together on the freeway in a sort of materialised HyperContext that both literally and ideologically disrupts linear progress narratives and the flow of commodities and labourers through the city. Crucially, this ramshackle coalition is committed to social justice for all; they even have recycling programmes and makeshift public healthcare services. As with the temporary thirdspace that opens up on Paul and Elaine's lawn in *Music for Torching*, the freeway becomes 'a space *beyond* property' that accommodates an entirely new social system.<sup>169</sup> And, unlike Bobby, this temporary community does not *evade* the dominant culture by taking advantage of its socio-economic invisibility but rather commits active spatial transgressions to destabilise naturalised conventions. Here, characters might be hemmed in to racially ghettoised areas, but their lives are not reduced by ghettoised thinking: for a moment, they simply refuse to subordinate themselves to a discourse of seamless, integrated, global commercialism.

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<sup>165</sup> Lefebvre, p.165.

<sup>166</sup> Harrison, p.306.

<sup>167</sup> Yamashita, p.155.

<sup>168</sup> Yamashita, p.121.

<sup>169</sup> Huehls, p.74.

Yet, given the precariousness of the situation, and the fact that the entire site will soon burn to the ground, this inversion of capitalist norms cannot last, and it is this that differentiates Yamashita's work from those that emphasise liberation solely through the imagination rather than through the transformation of material conditions. There is something playfully reckless about the characters' activity; Manzanar calls it 'one of those happy riots,' perpetuated by individuals who appear to know that they will once again become subject to the whims of the powerful.<sup>170</sup> Far from attempting to instil a new world order or build a communitarian utopia, they are merely using life's contingencies to their brief advantage. 'Like water spreading over an uneven space,' writes Mitchum Huehls, 'the motion of the homeless is determined by the objects that they do or do not run into.'<sup>171</sup> This is not to suggest that their actions are *not* inherently political or that they do not radically shift the dynamics of power, merely that they cannot be quantified according to 'predetermined ideological categories,' and cannot endure.<sup>172</sup> It is precisely because their actions are informal and temporary, little more than 'futile gestures without a master plan,' that they remain, initially at least, beyond the scope of social control.<sup>173</sup>

Like most processes of deterritorialisation, this assemblage is a transitional stage between different manifestations of capitalist codification.<sup>174</sup> Ultimately, the neoliberal narrative that prioritises property and the flow of commodities over people proves to be too powerful an imaginary to unseat. Manzanar recognises 'the utterly violent assumption underlying everything: that the homeless [are] expendable,' whilst 'citizens [have] a right to protect their property with firearms.'<sup>175</sup> Eventually, instead of addressing the underlying systemic issues that have resulted in migrant labourers congregating on the freeways, politicians, the army and the media mobilise to perpetuate historic, imperialist oppressions: with 'coordinated might' they 'look down as [they] had in the past on tiny islands and puny countries [...] and descend in

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<sup>170</sup> Yamashita, p.122.

<sup>171</sup> Huehls, p.75.

<sup>172</sup> Huehls, p.75.

<sup>173</sup> Yamashita, p.83.

<sup>174</sup> According to Deleuze and Guattari.

<sup>175</sup> Yamashita, p.123.

a single storm.<sup>176</sup> ‘Despite the celebratory nature of [this] great labouring choir,’ the homeless are eradicated in a storm of tear gas, smoke and gunfire.<sup>177</sup>

#### IV. Metafictional Interrogations

One might ask, then, whether it is possible to take from Yamashita’s novel anything as concrete as a practicable spatial tactic. If anything, *Tropic of Orange* seems to point to the sheer density of contingent events and processes of socio-spatial change that operate beyond the control, or even the understanding, of any one individual. And yet, there is one character who seems capable of perceiving and incorporating all these multiplicities and contradictions, into one epic, ongoing composition: ‘a society of sound. Flow of humanity. Heartbeat.’<sup>178</sup> Crucially, Manzanar Murakami, a self-styled conductor who watches the freeway from above, does not attempt to define, manage or reduce space by turning noise into structured sound. Nor does he anticipate or ideologically predetermine what will emerge. He merely listens and accepts that there is only change. Nevertheless, in its indiscriminateness, Manzanar’s score is something of a great leveller: within its network, concepts of public and private are no more valuable to spatial production than the tactics of the homeless, and global neoliberalism is simply one sound to be factored in, with new heterogeneities and affiliations always liable to emerge. Put simply, it is an embrace of difference. As a Japanese-American with a keen sense of his own shifting diasporic identity, Manzanar is presented as a particularly adept cultural synthesiser, imbued with what David Palumbo-Liu calls ‘a particularly productive, post-industrial subjectivity.’<sup>179</sup> Indeed, he is impressively capable of thinking globally, perceiving his home as densely layered with maps that he can ‘pick out like transparent windows and place [...] delicately and consecutively in a complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic.’<sup>180</sup> These ‘layers, clefs, instruments’ are *all* ideologically burdened constructions: from the geology of the land to ‘the man-made grid of civil utilities,’ from ‘human behaviour’ to property and transport,

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<sup>176</sup> Yamashita, p.239.

<sup>177</sup> Yamashita, p.239.

<sup>178</sup> Yamashita, p.36.

<sup>179</sup> David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Radical Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.343, as qtd. by Susanne Wegener, ‘SUPERNAFTA and the Language of Global Excess: Trade Zone Encounters in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*,’ *Contact Spaces of American Culture: Globalising Local Phenomena*, ed. by Petra Eckhard, Klaus Rieser-Wohlfarter and Silvia Schultersmandl (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2012), pp.77-95, p. 86.

<sup>180</sup> Yamashita, p.56.

‘variations both dynamic and stagnant, patterns and connections by every conceivable definition from the distribution of wealth to race, from patterns of climate to the curious blueprint of the skies.’<sup>181</sup> Manzanar can see – or hear – it all.

What the title of Homes’ *Music for Torching* merely hints at, and what Dutton’s paradoxical cacophony of everyday instruments only implies, Manzanar’s score makes explicit: the noise of the present, so often perceived as a drone that keeps us tethered to capitalist imperatives, is never simply white noise. Rather, it is an orchestra whose individual instruments one must learn to hear, an ongoing symphony with repeated refrains and sudden departures. It is not simply Manzanar’s score that is alive to all these contingencies and possibilities, but Yamashita’s novel, which embodies a complex, palimpsest of narratives. In this respect, both draw comparisons with Deleuze and Guattari’s multi-layered rhizome for their attempts to embrace all the heterogeneities and contradictions of space that dominant discourses habitually suppress. Where Dutton’s narrator initially attempts to transform *herself* into a body without organs, to disastrous effect, Manzanar uses his artful musical arranging to capture the specific, but ever changing complexity of Los Angeles, whilst partially separating himself from it. His art thus treads a careful line between coexisting with the groundwork below and observing it from a distance: it is, as Hutcheon advocates, both within and outside the dominant power structures.

To ‘enable the coalition-building necessary for staging political resistance,’ what is needed, Yamashita implies, is a synthesis of localised spatial tactics *and* metafictional interrogation to produce more durable narratives of resistance. In the words of Summer Gioia Harrison, Yamashita’s HyperContextual approach ‘juxtaposes neoliberal and coalitional spaces,’ commercial narratives and grassroots storytelling, to expose the many histories – both material and imagined – that constitute any single place, and emphasise the value of remapping or recuperating these narratives as a first step towards social justice.<sup>182</sup> Unquestionably, the homeless repurposing of the freeway exposes the fact that dominated geographies are human constructions that might be changed through the coalitional social action of diverse

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<sup>181</sup> Yamashita, p.57.

<sup>182</sup> Harrison, p.303.

oppressed groups. However, to effectively disrupt this logic of progress and pave the way for alternative stories, Yamashita is *first* intent on mobilising magical realism to reimagine space and time as fluid and fundamentally unfixed; this tactic allows her to link everything from ‘human and environmental rights movements in Latin America’ to ‘Native struggles against colonialism, and African-American resistance to slavery and discrimination.’<sup>183</sup> When Archangel and his motley crew of illegal immigrants drag Latin-American history and space into North America, and join the freeway community, Manzanar has an ‘uncanny sense of the elasticity of the moment, of time and space.’<sup>184</sup> He is bringing with him not only the memory of colonial oppressions, and evidence of ongoing abuses of power, but also a new type of ethical poetry that refutes contemporary U.S. power and incorporates diverse national and ethnic communities and histories into its structure. In time, this community begins to create ‘a new kind of grid, this one defined not by inanimate structures or other living things but by himself and others like him.’<sup>185</sup>

Amy C. Tang argues that what makes Yamashita’s text so fascinatingly unique is its willingness to posit its ‘recycling and repurposing as aesthetic activities that take place in a realm distinctly segregated from the social world, with only the most limited and indirect ability to intervene in it.’ She goes on to explain that, ‘far from designating a *reconciliation* between aesthetic form and social experience, pastiche in *Tropic of Orange* seems to foreground their *separation* and even incompatibility.’<sup>186</sup> Certainly, in the final, magical clash between Supernafta, the supervillain embodiment of NAFTA, and El Gran Mojado, the ancient Archangel in his latest, lucha libre incarnation, Yamashita literalises metaphors to such an extent that she does not simply expose the ways in which the cultural and economic realms have been conflated by official languages in the past, but takes advantage of the metaphoric potential of fiction without then anchoring her own narrative in material reality. Thus, this tapping of speculative literature’s full potential debunks neoliberal rhetoric whilst inviting the reader to *question* literature’s capacity to intervene politically. Yet, as we have seen, Yamashita *does* intervene politically at various

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<sup>183</sup> Harrison, p.281.

<sup>184</sup> Yamashita, p.123.

<sup>185</sup> Yamashita, p.238.

<sup>186</sup> Tang, p.92.

points in the novel, oscillating between the magical and the realist throughout. Unlike Dutton, her unwillingness to reconcile the social and the aesthetic is not cause for anxiety. Instead, as Tang notes,

The relative autonomy of the aesthetic sphere becomes in the novel a space in which to harbour a utopian longing for a form of subjectivity not wholly determined by one's social positioning, even as it always retains the trace of those determinations. In this surprising retrieval of the utopian aspects of the aesthetic, the novel's pastiche not only challenges conventional approaches to ethnic literature, but also intervenes in a larger critical tendency to discount the value of aesthetic and theoretical distance in favour of purely local and immanent form of knowledge.<sup>187</sup>

I do not wish to suggest that Yamashita's novel in any way devalues grassroots projects of cross-cultural cooperation and social care. Buzzworm's concept of 'self-gentrification by a self-made set of standards and respectability' is but one example of a plausible attempt to exchange destructive, top-down gentrification for a grassroots interethnic effort to 'restore the neighbourhood. Clean up the streets. Take care of the people.'<sup>188</sup> Similarly, his voracious interest in all sorts of music from diverse backgrounds, and his eagerness to introduce young, black men to the history of jazz in order that they might learn where they came from, represents a desire to 'get behind another man's perspectives' whilst creating a dialogue that extends across space and time.<sup>189</sup> Nor do I mean to imply that Yamashita's HyperContexts are nothing but aesthetic flourishes, or that she is uninterested in fiction's potential to incite material change. Rather, *Tropic of Orange* demonstrates how 'fictions' gain traction in the world and come to limit possibilities for resistance, whilst implying that the best way to expose the slipping points between them is to read them metafictionally alongside one another in the speculative realm of the novel. Crucially, the imagination is not disconnected from material reality, but is invoked as fundamentally capable of re-contextualising it. Amidst the utter devastation caused after the army descends to eradicate the temporary community on the Harbour

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<sup>187</sup> Tang, p.85.

<sup>188</sup> Yamashita, p.83.

<sup>189</sup> Yamashita, p.103.



freeway, Yamashita offers a tantalising glimmer of a possible break in the domain of the social imaginary. Manzanar senses that his ‘kind of interpretation’ has spread through the metropolis, ‘sprout[ing] grassroots conductors of every sort.’<sup>190</sup> What he is referring to is not purely metaphorical. Instead, as Buzzworm notes, the ‘amazing thing was everybody in L.A. was walking. They just had no choice. There wasn’t a transportation artery that a vehicle could pass through. [...] so people were finally getting out, close to the ground, seeing the city like he did.’<sup>191</sup> It is an implicit incitement to the reader to listen for more diverse rhythms, or, at the very least, to ask – as Bobby does of the cultural, social and economic divisions that ‘nobody knew how to change’ – ‘What are these goddamn lines anyway? What do they connect? What do they divide?’<sup>192</sup>

## Conclusion

‘What if we refuse to convene space into time?’ asks Massey in *Space, Place and Gender*, opposing Jameson’s claim that one type of inadequate history-telling has simply replaced another.<sup>193</sup> What if, instead of conceiving of ourselves as being locked into a single master narrative on a fixed trajectory, we look to space and discover not an inert surface or a chaotic hyperspace, but ‘a meeting up of histories?’ Furthermore, what if we refuse the debilitating associations of place with territory and meaningful experience, and of space with, ‘what? The outside? The abstract? The meaningless?’<sup>194</sup> In this chapter, I have sought answers to these questions in *SPRAWL* and *Tropic of Orange*, identifying a turn towards what Massey calls ‘outwardlookingness:’ an alertness to, and sense of responsibility for, the co-existing and ongoing heterogeneities of space.<sup>195</sup> In both texts, identity emerges as neither an ontologically stable interiority, nor an entity that can be ascribed exclusively to a certain terrain or racial origin; rather, it is shifting and diversely located. Crucially, there is nothing inherently utopian about this plurality, and both novels display some ambivalence about whether their characters’ minor interruptions in dominated spatialities can – or *should* – invoke large-scale change. Whilst Dutton’s middle-

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<sup>190</sup> Yamashita, p.157; p.254.

<sup>191</sup> Yamashita, p.218-219.

<sup>192</sup> Yamashita, p.268.

<sup>193</sup> Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, p.4.

<sup>194</sup> Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, p.4.

<sup>195</sup> Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, p.15.

class narrator suffers crushing anxieties about her own privilege and repeatedly questions the value of her predominantly aesthetic and certainly individualistic endeavours, Yamashita suggests that her disenfranchised characters' revolutionary spatial practices are only capable of disrupting power relations on a temporary basis.

In chapter four, I attend in more detail to the structural inequalities that have historically accompanied suburbanisation, and are increasingly visible in processes of urban gentrification. Nevertheless, in these novels, both writers go some way towards imagining how socially repressed groups of women, migrants or homeless people might form and circulate more complex counter-hegemonic discourses of identity and citizenship. Like Paul Gilroy's ship, Soja's thirdspace and Deleuze and Guattari's schizophrenic (dual-)consciousness, *SPRAWL* and *Tropic of Orange* imagine suburban sprawl as an in-between spatiality that mediates between opposing poles without dispensing with them entirely or resolving conflict into a single point of view. By moving between and beyond established binaries, and adopting myriad, un-static perceptions, Dutton and Yamashita make it impossible to consider either suburbia or the United States as fixed, settled and enclosed.

#### 4. Seeping Beyond the Core: Post-Metropolitan Horror in Twenty-First-Century Detroit

My final chapter journeys into two thus-far uncharted locations: the medium of film and the geography of the urban core, around which suburbia has been physically and imaginatively structured. It also directly confronts issues of race. From these new vantage points, I re-examine the suburbs, and consider the extent to which twenty-first-century horror – long thought to *validate* white middle-class anti-urbanism – increasingly confronts the causes of post-metropolitan decline. Since 2010, several genre-subverting horror films have turned to Detroit to re-evaluate the nature and dynamics of its landscape. This chapter scrutinises Jim Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2014), David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2015) and Fede Alvarez's *Don't Breathe* (2016), arguing that each film exposes visual culture's role in shaping Detroit and destabilises the racialised, urban-suburban binaries upon which much of the city's anti-urban discourse depends.

For most critics, Detroit's role on screen testifies to an ongoing, racially coded amnesia regarding the city's history, and a myopic attitude towards its current predicament. However, in the films under discussion, fears are not sublimated into metaphorical place-holders, but are explicitly foregrounded, illuminating what has, until now, remained only implicit: the symbolic borders that work to contain and isolate inner-city Detroit as a 'singular, cautionary disaster.'<sup>1</sup> By redeploying horror tropes typically associated with suburbia – the home invasion, slasher and zombie movie – in a post-metropolitan Detroit, whilst refusing to restore order or symbolic defence mechanisms at the end, the films emphasise that boundaries have shifted. They suggest, moreover, that it is no longer possible to take shelter in the structural privileges of 'affluence, whiteness, and geographic advantages.'<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, it initially appears that the films are intent on obscuring one of Detroit's most fundamental issues. In all three combined, there is only one black character with a speaking part, and race is never directly alluded to; it remains

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Herron, *AfterCulture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), p.100.

<sup>2</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, 'It Follows: Precarity, Thanatopolitics, and the Ambient Horror Film,' *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (January 2017), pp. 234-249, p.239.

largely unseen and entirely unspoken. Whilst horror has a long and troubling history of side-lining people of colour, such an omission is particularly startling in a city that is approximately 80% African-American, within a state that is 80% white.<sup>3</sup> Yet these films do not simply echo the systematic racism that has created a geographically, culturally and economically stratified metropolis. Nor do they further the media's implicit (and occasionally explicit) association of blackness with criminality, decline and congenital evil. Rather, they seek to exaggerate, expose and criticise entrenched ways of conceptualising Detroit and its population. Whilst ostensibly whitewashing the city, the films are in fact full of allusions to people of colour being reduced, contorted, silenced and kept forcibly off-screen. Similarly, each engages, and renders either ghastly or – in the case of *Only Lovers Left Alive* – absurd, fears of corrupting black influence or the threat of 'foreign' invasion. Ultimately, what emerges as truly horrifying is not the 'monstrous' population that continues to haunt the 'ruins' of America's industrial heartland, but the socio-economic landscape itself, and the political and cultural precedents that have placed the burden of responsibility for its failings upon the poor, predominantly black community that remains. Unlike the cultural zeitgeist that has come to be known as Ruin Porn, recent Detroit-based horror neither depopulates the city nor obfuscates its most urgent issues. Instead, it subtly calls attention to ongoing socio-spatial injustices in Detroit's shifting landscape, whilst intervening in more prevalent discourses about precarity. Such interventions are arguably more urgent than ever now that Detroit's inner city is increasingly being reimagined as a new frontier, prompting white middle-class gentrifiers to migrate back to the core. This trend threatens to reinscribe dominant colonial discourses associated with suburban development and push communities of colour to the increasingly ghettoised suburbs.

This chapter is divided into two parts, each comprising three sections. Section One begins by problematising a recent media portrait of Detroit's spectacular 'rebirth,' and traces the origins of its rhetoric back to the early twentieth-century. It examines the complex developments that transformed Detroit into one of the most horizontal,

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter explores this side-lining in detail. For information on representations of race in American horror, see Robin R Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011). According to the 2010 census, approximately 80% of Detroit's population is black, 10% is Hispanic and 10% is white.

sprawling cities in the U.S., and reveals the myriad causes of its infrastructural and economic problems. Detroit's condition as a racially and economically segregated city is neither entirely unique – replicated to lesser degrees in Newark, Pittsburgh and other post-industrial cities – nor simply an inevitable effect of advanced capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this former leading industrial centre has a rich history of being commandeered as both a metaphor for American decline *and* an isolated sacrifice zone from which humanity has already escaped. This section details some of the complex human decisions and drives that have shaped Detroit geographically and imaginatively, with the intention of displacing popular conceptualisations of its decline as 'natural,' unavoidable or universal. It also debunks racially coded narratives that evoke Detroit's 'fall from grace' as a by-product of race riots, white flight and corrupt black governance. In outlining the decades of suburban redlining, workplace discrimination and public transport disinvestment for black communities that preceded the riots *and* deindustrialisation, I wish to demonstrate that Detroit's 'urban and suburban identities' and histories are, and have always been, 'profoundly related and politically charged.'<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the border between Detroit and everywhere else is not nearly as absolute as it is often imagined to be.

Sections two and three explore dominant cultural representations of Detroit in 1980s media, and argue that these representations helped to bolster an already-prevalent, racialised anti-urbanism. Section two complicates the easy association of sensationalist media with violent Hollywood horror by reappraising a contemporaneous cinematic portrayal of Detroit that confronts these discourses. Where chapter one offered revisionist readings of suburban fictions that have all-too-often been criticised for upholding imagined city-suburb boundaries, this section seeks to expose a similarly complex and interesting prehistory in 1980s urban horror. It argues that Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* (1987) does not denigrate Detroit's specific cultural and physical geography to a generalised portrait of urban degeneracy, but is both spatially and historically precise. Section three interrogates the more recent cultural zeitgeist known as Ruin Porn, focusing on the photography of Andrew Moore, Camilo Jose Vergara, Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre. It contends that

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<sup>4</sup> By advanced capitalism, I am referring here to deindustrialisation and globalisation.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Maria Kenyon, *Dreaming Suburbia: Detroit and the Production of Post-War Space and Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), p.3.

ruin imagery risks sublimating the violence at the heart of socio-economic decline to aesthetic pleasure, whilst validating a passive acceptance of Detroit's predicament as inevitable and already beyond repair. Writer Dora Apel recognises that 'to behold the descent of contemporary society into collapse and to find it pleasurable and beautiful without, at the same time, finding it politically troubling and contingent is to succumb to the profound demoralisation effected by a capitalist system that has nearly suffocated the idea of an emancipated society based on equality instead of class privilege.'<sup>6</sup>

The second part of this chapter examines the extent to which recent Detroit-based horror counters this demoralisation by bearing witness to structural inequality and intervening in – and ultimately diverting from – the city-as-nightmare trope. In section one, I propose that *Don't Breathe* spotlights the causal dynamics of its characters' violent and criminal behaviour, subtly alluding to both localised and more widespread socio-economic injustice and entrenched oppression throughout. The film engages the standard tropes of its genre only to confound expectations by eventually upending them: the early promise of gothic horror yields to a typical heist story, before giving way to a home invasion horror in which the relationship between predator and prey undergoes constant shifts. By the time the film establishes its concluding allegiance to the backwoodsman story – a sub-genre traditionally associated with wild, *rural* spaces and their apparently savage, degenerate inhabitants – viewers have been repeatedly forced into confrontation with their own expectations and prejudices about the communities that continue to inhabit inner-city Detroit. Consequently, I argue that the film's 'overt courting of extremist right-wing ideologies' is more self-conscious and evaluative than critics have so far acknowledged.<sup>7</sup> In section two, I contend that *It Follows* goes further, refusing to imagine either Detroit's landscape or its population as aberrations that can be eliminated to symbolically safeguard the sanctity of middle-class suburbia. Here, the slasher sub-genre popularised by John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) is plucked from its hermetically sealed suburban setting and redeployed in a nightmarishly

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<sup>6</sup> Dora Apel, *Beautiful, Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), p.73.

<sup>7</sup> Aja Romano, 'Horror Movies Reflect Cultural Fears. In 2016, Americans Feared Invasion,' *Vox Magazine*, December 2016, web. <<https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/21/13737476/horror-movies-2016-invasion>> [Accessed 6 May 2017].

fluid, changing metropolis. In this film, what pursues the characters is not a singular threat but something of a total displacement. The 'It' embodies a widespread existential crisis that forces individuals to confront their own precarity.

Finally, I argue that Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive* breathes new life into both the vampire and zombie tropes, reimagining vampires as white gentrifiers who lay claim to the weed-choked 'wilderness' of Detroit. Zombies, meanwhile, do not exist except in the minds of the vampires who use the term to describe the working-class 'holdouts' that disturb their solitude. Ultimately, the film's monsters are not the poor, the black and the working class, who remain resolutely sympathetic when they appear at all, but the white, aristocratic vampires, Adam and Eve, who swoop in to colonise their homes and feed on their blood. In recent years, narratives about the irrevocability of Detroit's decline have begun to give way to fantasies of 'starting again' with a small group of creative individuals in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Whilst not necessarily rejecting gentrification altogether, Jarmusch's depiction of white vampire 'hipsters' tunes into the ugly racial undertones of the colonialist rhetoric circling around Detroit.

The 2011 census data revealed a 'new racial porousness of Eight Mile Road,' partly a result of escalating black middle-class flight from the city core.<sup>8</sup> Where the white suburbanites they joined may once have fled, the collapse of the housing market has left many with no choice, 'forc[ing] integration through economic collapse.'<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, on the other side of Eight Mile Road, the white population has begun to grow for the first time in more than half a century, provoking fears about shifting power dynamics and disrespect for local traditions. As the wealthy and powerful speculate on real estate – often from a distance – the powerless are forced to adapt. Interestingly, the conception that Jarmusch's Adam has of himself as an alienated outsider in a homogenised, ahistorical culture recalls earlier portraits of victimised suburban masculinity. As with Cheever, Updike and Yates before him, Jarmusch does not embrace this conceptualisation, but rather uses parody to pillory evocations of the white middle classes as refugees living in exile, and implies that the opposite

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Binelli, *The Last Days of Detroit: Life and Death of an American Giant* (London: The Bodley Head, 2013), p.133.

<sup>9</sup> Binelli, p.134.

is true; the ‘vampire’ middle and upper classes are frequently guilty of accelerating decline.

Stephen Marotta observes that Detroit’s story ‘is one of borders, manipulated by myriad socio-economic and political powers; these borders divide, separate, and in some cases, isolate, black from white, poor from rich, [...] history from future’ and city from suburb. ‘A new story might tell us much about the transcendence of these borders, or a redevelopment of the social landscape.’<sup>10</sup> I would contend that contemporary horror is a fitting vehicle for these new narratives. Far from exorcising or evading the problems of the urban sphere, *Don’t Breathe*, *It Follows* and *Only Lovers Left Alive* invoke them as structural issues. Their white protagonists might be represented as those with the ongoing power and authority to tell Detroit’s story, but the disenfranchised ‘Others’ are foregrounded as figures forced to operate under various processes of erasure. At the same time, the films work to explode myths from the inside, using the known forms as compass points around which to weave new stories that implicitly critique the originals. By acknowledging how borders are created and sustained, they begin the crucial process of transforming metropolitan Detroit into a permeable spatiality whose symbolic boundaries can no longer hold.

#### 4.1. Context

##### I. The Production of Detroit from the Suburban Side-Lines

In 2011, Detroit garnered some of the best press attention it had received for several decades. Obama had made the bailout of Detroit’s auto-industry a priority during his first term, and at the February 6<sup>th</sup> Super Bowl XLV, Chrysler announced its comeback with a sleek commercial, featuring Detroit-born rapper, Eminem. ‘What does a town that’s been to hell and back know about the finer things in life?’ asks a gravelly voiced narrator as the camera roves past smoking factories, lithe, sweating bodies and Detroit’s infamous Joe Louis Fist. ‘More than most,’ he affirms.

You see, it’s the hottest fires that make the hardest steel. Add hard work and conviction. And a know-how that runs generations deep in every last one of

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Marotta, *Creative Reconstruction in the City: An Analysis of Art, Shrinking, and the Story of the American Dream in Detroit, MI* (Unpublished MA Thesis: Arizona State University, 2011), pp.101-2.



us. That's who we are. That's our story. Now it's probably not the one you've been reading in the papers. The one being written by folks who have never even been here. Don't know what we're capable of. Because when it comes to luxury, it's as much about where it's from as who it's for. Now we're from America – but this isn't New York City, or the Windy City, or Sin City, and we're certainly no one's Emerald City.

No. 'This is the Motor City,' declares Eminem, striding through an affluent downtown to a beautifully maintained 1920s movie-palace. 'And this is what we do.'<sup>11</sup> This phoenix from the ashes narrative was a startling riposte to the regular showcasing of Detroit's collapsing infrastructure and morally corrupt inhabitants, and it proved popular on a national scale, promising a return to American-made goods and services and a reinvestment in America's declining industrial cities. Crucially, it did so by re-invoking the early-twentieth-century perception of Detroit as a 'capitalist dream town of unrivalled innovation and bountiful reward,' a place where the most tenacious of the working class could rise above their origins.<sup>12</sup> It is a fantastic example of the reification of a single narrative. For Chrysler, Detroit is nothing if it is *not* Motor City. In which case, what – and where – had it been for the last forty years? The commercial's uplifting portrayal of industrial rebirth and narrative reclamation not only ignored those residents unlikely to receive any financial benefit from the bailout, but also obscured the fact that Detroit's dazzling reinvention was reliant upon coerced shrinkage and the imposition of sanctions upon its poorest citizens. As parts of Midtown and Downtown Detroit boomed, attracting (predominantly white) newcomers and outside investment, the most distressed (and overwhelmingly black) neighbourhoods were being metaphorically and literally snuffed out, quietly denied basic services such as streetlamps, fire services and water. Furthermore, whilst appearing to criticise outsiders for casting judgment from afar, Chrysler's 'Imported from Detroit' tagline effectively embraced the idea of the city as other-worldly and exotic, somewhere ripe for re-colonisation. Its nostalgia for 'old' Detroit drew upon a long-standing institutional racism.

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<sup>11</sup> Chrysler 200, Chrysler, Advertisement, Super Bowl XLV, 6 February 2011, Television.

<sup>12</sup> Binelli, p.3.

Two years later, Detroit became the largest city in U.S. history to file for municipal bankruptcy. It was approximately 18 billion dollars in debt. As Mark Binelli notes, of this ‘about half [was] owed to retired city workers, who were promised health and pension benefits that the city [could] no longer afford.’<sup>13</sup> More was needed for Detroit’s ailing public school system. Meanwhile, crime rates soared, with the grossly overstretched police department charged with ‘one of the worst 911 response times in the country.’<sup>14</sup> Manufacturing had by no means revived the Motor City; it remained one of the poorest and most poorly integrated cities in the nation, bordered by some of the wealthiest suburbs in the United States. The ugly racial undertones and concealed power relations of Chrysler’s projected narrative are hard to miss. In refusing to acknowledge the ongoing poverty and racial animus that divides metropolitan Detroit, Chrysler exemplifies a tendency on the part of the media and visual arts to evoke parts of Detroit as obsolete and expendable. In fact, their commercial is testament to the auto-industry’s historic and ongoing role in shaping, and ultimately stratifying, Detroit to its own ends.

How did Detroit become a metropolis of such unparalleled polarities? If popular media representations of early-twentieth-century Detroit are to be believed, the city was remarkable for smashing material and philosophical barriers, not building them. Its spectacular transformation from a relatively modest city, with a diversified economy, in 1890, to the fourth largest city in the United States in 1920, can be attributed almost entirely to the birth of the assembly line and of a machine that promised unprecedented access to mobility.<sup>15</sup> Not only was the automobile marketed as a product to which every ambitious American could aspire, but also its main manufacturers developed an international reputation for helping to ‘lift hundreds of thousands of American workers into the middle class’ through their generous provisions.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Ford Motors presented itself as uniquely diverse and inclusive, employing more African-Americans and immigrant labourers than any

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<sup>13</sup> Binelli, p.302.

<sup>14</sup> Binelli, p.75.

<sup>15</sup> According to Jerry Herron, Detroit’s economy in 1890 was ‘based on timber and railroad cars, cigar manufacturing and stoves, locomotives, pharmaceuticals, and marine engines.’ Jerry Herron, ‘Borderland/Borderama/Detroit: Part 1,’ *Places Journal*, July 2010 <<https://placesjournal.org/article/borderama-detroit-1/>> [Accessed 4 June 2017].

<sup>16</sup> Micheline Maynard, ‘For an Icon of America: A Sudden Reversal,’ *New York Times*, 1 June 2009 <[http://archive.boston.com/business/articles/2009/06/01/for\\_an\\_icon\\_of\\_america\\_a\\_sudden\\_reversal](http://archive.boston.com/business/articles/2009/06/01/for_an_icon_of_america_a_sudden_reversal)> [Accessed 6 May 2017].

other contemporary employer. Detroit's carefully controlled urbanisation was unlike that of any other city in America or Europe. Long before the mass suburbanisation of the 1950s, Detroit developed according to a leap-frog spatial logic, as a city of distinct regions congregated around factories. In 1920, Henry Ford opened the world's largest manufacturing complex in the industrial suburb of Baton Rouge, and encouraged his automobile-owning workers to move to the affordable housing he built around it. When the auto-industry reached its peak in 1950, the city represented a vast network of blue-collar neighbourhoods that sprawled over 140 square miles.

Yet Ford's suburbanisation of Detroit was motivated by a desire to *weaken* trade union power and by a deep racial bias that locked black employees and residents within increasingly isolated inner-city areas. Indeed, whilst white employees were encouraged to seek upward mobility in well-connected suburban neighbourhoods like Dearborn, their black peers were restricted, by processes of redlining and prejudiced banking practices, to more central neighbourhoods like Black Bottom.<sup>17</sup> Poorly serviced by public transportation, bewilderingly distant from the nearest manufacturing plants and filled with substandard housing peddled at extortionate rates, several of these neighbourhoods became slums populated by residents on the brink of starvation. Whilst other forms of social discrimination eased during the following decades, patterns of racial and ethnic segregation persisted, with cases of unauthorised white mobs terrorising the few upwardly mobile black homeowners that ventured into majority-white suburbs.<sup>18</sup> By the early 1960s, a publicly funded highway system had all-but obscured the most destitute inner-city neighbourhoods from white commuters' view.

By physically and conceptually 'ghosting' inner-city Detroit, making it less and less real as an inhabited city, developers could reframe the exclusionary suburbs as spaces of harmony and inclusion that had no historical connection to, or responsibility for, the city from which they grew. For the auto-industry, which benefitted from cheaper, ex-urban land for factories and a greater reliance on cars,

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<sup>17</sup> See Binelli, p.93.

<sup>18</sup> For an example, see the case of Ossian Sweet, a black doctor who was arrested for facing down mob of white homeowners in July 1925. Sweet was eventually acquitted of murder. See Victoria W. Wolcott, 'Defending the Home: Ossian Sweet and the Struggle against Segregation in 1920s Detroit,' *OAHS Magazine of History*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer, 1993), pp. 23-27.

the obsolescence of the city was not entirely detrimental. Within time, shops, restaurants and department stores moved to cater for the majority-white middle class, the inner-city tax base shrunk, public services faltered, crime spiked, and suburbanites felt entirely justified for making the move. Meanwhile, in the city, Detroit's burgeoning black middle class advanced into vacated jobs and properties and mayors developed a similar 'zero-sum attitude toward resources, growth, and the overall development of the region.'<sup>19</sup> By the time a second race riot swept through Detroit in 1967, out-migration had been in full swing for more than two decades, and the racial, economic and conceptual borders between city and suburb had ossified.<sup>20</sup>

Today, the race riots are still all-too-often cited as the main cause of Detroit's white-flight, the outflow of capital, and the city's fall from industrial 'greatness.' It is easy to see why: the events of 1967 received extensive media attention, with images of hulking tanks and burning buildings, armed white guards and enraged black mobs filling national newspapers and screens for months after the crowds had dispersed. After years of predominantly positive press, 'the motor force of modernity' was beginning to resemble 'modernity in ruins.'<sup>21</sup> In truth, Detroit's industrial decline did not begin in earnest until the mid-1970s, when its auto-industry began to lose out to a global market that could offer competitive prices, fuel-efficiency and cheaper labour costs, a predicament that Detroit shared with many of the nation's other cities. Its socio-economic and racial problems, meanwhile, were far more deep-rooted and wide-ranging. In the following section, I demonstrate that such assumptions about the riots, whilst seldom intentionally racist, are the legacy of a lengthy reification – by film and the media – of a narrative of Detroit's black residents as accountable for both their own destitution *and* that of their white middle-class peers.

## **II. Human Ruins: Anti-Urbanism on the Big Screen**

In the years after the riots, right-wing discourse and sensationalist news reports that portrayed the inner city as a violent, inhospitable war-zone began to congeal into a

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<sup>19</sup> Binelli, p.130.

<sup>20</sup> A survey conducted within the black community after the 1967 riot found that all were dissatisfied with Detroit's long-standing socio-economic conditions. Issues cited were police brutality, poor housing provisions, scant employment, inner-city segregation, racist commercial practices and inadequate public education. Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), p.40.

<sup>21</sup> Apel, p.6.

shared fantasy of the city as a hell beyond redemption. This anti-urbanism did not originate from a single source. Nor was it promulgated solely in Detroit, whose socio-economic problems were replicated in numerous cities that had experienced rapid suburbanisation and deindustrialisation. Rather, as Eric Avila notes, the narrative ‘took shape within a mutually constitutive relationship between cultural producers and their audiences, as well as between political luminaries and their constituencies.’<sup>22</sup> Whilst an increasingly alarmist journalism generated fear amongst the middle classes, it also vindicated the white flight that had helped to create urban problems in the first place. At the same time, it both authenticated and was authenticated by a burgeoning neoliberal politics that advanced punitive policies and was hostile to welfare spending.

In Detroit, racially coded discourses of criminality and violence increasingly made use of Eight Mile Road as both a physical dividing line and a cultural and philosophical boundary between the apparently impoverished, crime-addled, African-American city and the wealthy, white suburbs. By transforming the inner city in general – and its black inhabitants in particular – into scapegoats for oppression, destitution and decline, these developments naturalised the structural inequalities between urban and suburban spheres and mystified the political, social and economic causes of urban misery. In *Cracked Coverage: Television News, The Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy* (1994), Jimmy L. Reeves and Richard Campbell observe that news depictions of the 1980s crack-epidemic often resembled ‘siege narratives in which a colour-coded mob of dehumanized inner-city criminals threatened the suburbs, small towns, schools, families, status and authority of (white) Middle America.’<sup>23</sup> In addition to ‘demonizing the ghetto and its inhabitants,’ such accounts ‘validated an ideal of community as privatized, exclusive and culturally homogeneous.’<sup>24</sup> As visceral narratives of urban disorder took shape, they helped to transform a diverse population of suburbanites into a single, white community in the popular imagination.

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<sup>22</sup> Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004), p.229.

<sup>23</sup> Jimmy L. Reeves and Richard Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television News, The Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p.136, as qtd. by Steve Macek, ‘Places of Horror: Fincher’s “Seven” and Fear of the City in Recent Hollywood Film,’ *College Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Winter 1999), pp. 80-97, p.92.

<sup>24</sup> Macek, p.92.

By the mid-1980s, these images of urban monstrosity had found their way onto the big screen, and were being marketed as mass entertainment. The city-as-nightmare trope already had a rich cinematic history in the form of the highly stylised film noir of the 1940s and 50s, whose muted colour-palette of grey and brown captured a shadowy realm of sin and temptation. Yet the gory sensationalism that characterised 1980s and 90s films such as John Carpenter's *Escape From New York* (1981) and Alex Proyas' Detroit-based *The Crow* (1994), was unprecedented and widespread. In these depictions, the city emerges as a fantastically feral Other, plagued by violent, parasitic low-lives who are so far beyond redemption that they must be contained and ultimately expunged by brave, white justice-servers. During this period, even films that did not take inner-city mayhem as their theme frequently advanced a grim view of the urban sphere. Indeed, it was during this time that the popularity of suburban 'slashers' and 'home invasion' thrillers spiked, appealing to those who got a thrill from seeing middle-class safe-havens threatened by – but ultimately fortified against – degenerate, mainly urban, individuals. Whilst none explicitly coded urban violence as black, the suburbs were almost always white.

In 'Places of Horror: Fincher's "Seven" and Fear of the City in Recent Hollywood Film' (1999), Steve Macek uses the example of David Fincher's *Seven* (1995) to demonstrate Hollywood's culpability in mystifying urban problems during this era. Instead of confronting the source of urban mayhem and criminality, the film projects a narrative in which the 'barbarism of the city is utterly unrelated to entrenched racial oppression or a dysfunctional economy; rather, it is a manifestation of pure evil.'<sup>25</sup> Murderer John Doe may purport to be working in the service of uncovering the true face of the wickedness around him, but the fact that he is, above all, psychotic, renders his sociological enquiries void. Macek has little hope that cinema might shine a light on structural inequality, concluding that 'as long as terrified representations of the city like those promulgated by *Seven* enjoy cultural prominence, it will be difficult to create a politics that rises above fear and fear-driven punitive public policy.'<sup>26</sup> However, not all urban horrors of the era are to be

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<sup>25</sup> Macek, p.95.

<sup>26</sup> Macek, p.95.

tarnished with the same brush. A reappraisal of Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* reveals a far more nuanced and subversive engagement with the power structures that have shaped contemporary Detroit, and exposes a vital precursor to the three films that will be analysed later in this chapter.

In a particularly visceral scene, *Robocop*'s eponymous cyborg interrupts a sexual assault in a Detroit carpark by shooting one of the attackers in the groin. As the suspect drops to his knees screaming, the camera pans to the right, revealing a brightly lit poster of a pastel-hued business district, that reads 'Delta City: The Future Has a Silver Lining.' For those acquainted with Detroit's flag, the sentiment is uncannily familiar. Composed in 1805 after a fire destroyed all but one of the city's buildings, the flag's Latin insignias translate as 'It will rise again from the ashes' and 'we hope for better things,' mottos that evoke the very core of Detroit's identity as a longed-for, but perpetually deferred, comeback. And arguably, the sentiment was nothing if not still apt in 1987, at a time when the former industrial superpower was being widely referred to by the media as Murder City.<sup>27</sup> Yet the refrain of rebirth in a city still populated by thousands of people is deeply problematic, not only invoking Detroit as a fixed topoi of destitution, but also suggesting that its recovery is dependent upon top-down improvements and the substitution of current inhabitants with more ethical and virtuous others. Only then will the city truly 'rise again.'

It is precisely this image of Detroit that *Robocop* refuses to naturalise. Delta City's slogan does not reflect a widely held belief, but is instead the work of Omni Consumer Products, a sinister corporation intent on razing the crime-ridden centre of Old Detroit to the ground, and replacing it with towering paeans to private interest. First, however, they must ready it for takeover by physically and metaphorically erasing the huge population that still lives there. This is where Robocop – a zombified working-class cop whose body they legally own – comes in. The conspicuous new 'face' of a justice system that never sleeps and takes no prisoners,

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<sup>27</sup> According to Rebecca Kinney, 'This moniker emerged in the 1970s and was cemented as national media discussed preparations for the 1980 Republican National Convention in Detroit.' Kinney, 'Longing for Detroit: The Naturalisation of Racism Through Ruin Porn and Digital Memories,' *Media Fields Journal*, Issue 5 (2012), pp.1-14, p.2.

he functions as much as a deterrent to crime as he does an *advert* for Old Detroit's condition as an epicentre of disorder that must be abandoned. In fact, *Robocop* implies that the true horror of Detroit is not crime itself, undeniable a problem though this may be, but the powerful elite that controls its representation and the white middle-class hegemony that consumes it. In the film's opening sequence, a news programme that offers to 'give you the world' in three minutes intersperses shockingly biased details of Mexican border crises, mass unemployment and race riots with lengthy adverts for private hospital treatment and a board-game called *Nuke 'Em*, whose slogan is the cheery, 'Get them before they get you!' Broadcasting its commercial inserts without first including the frame of an on-screen television set, *Robocop* positions its viewers as the pacified consumers of ideologically suspect campaigns pedalled by corporations and the state to justify the takeover and privatisation of Detroit. In doing so, it not only draws attention to the ways in which Detroit is being transformed into a feared, mythological space or cautionary tale, but also refuses to absolve its viewers of their responsibility in isolating the city from modern America.

A quarter of a century later, *Robocop*'s future has all-but come to fruition in Detroit, with city-wide bankruptcy leading to the privatisation of water, fire, and police services, along with brutal 'let them burn' policies regarding arson attacks in the most destitute parts of the city. Of course, the growth of disaster capitalism that *Robocop* confronts and hyperbolises is by no means limited to Detroit, the birthplace of Fordism.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, as Dora Apel notes, Detroit continues to be imagined as 'the repository of widespread industrial decay, shorn of its actual complexities, histories, and contradictions.'<sup>29</sup> The following section argues that Detroit's continuing status as a place-holder can be explained, in part, by the burgeoning popularity of ruin imagery, which, though it testifies to the failure to maintain economic prosperity and social stability, isolates the city as a beautiful mausoleum with no ongoing connection to the living world.

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<sup>28</sup> Fordism – the standardised, industrialised form of mass production that became basis of modern industry – originated in Detroit, and is often cited as the main symbol of modernity itself.

<sup>29</sup> Apel, p.6.



### III. A Landscape Without Figures: ‘Ruin Porn’ and Aesthetic Depopulation

In 2010, Detroit reappeared in the cinematic imagination as a desolate, degenerate landscape, haunted by shadowy creatures with malicious intent. The surge began with Brad Anderson’s *Vanishing on 7<sup>th</sup> Street* (2010) a Hollywood horror in which nearly everyone in Detroit disappears during a momentary power black-out, seemingly snatched by darkness itself. As the city slips into an endless dusk, its few remaining inhabitants scavenge for light sources whilst desperately seeking a route out of the metropolitan core. Three years later, wildly successful indie feature *It Follows* turned to the inner-ring suburbs to evoke a creeping dread, as a disease in human form emerges from the city to stalk its middle-class victims. In *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Detroit is a beautiful ruin that time has forgotten; it is the ideal home for vampires hoping to survive and thrive without detection. Most recently, *Don’t Breathe* invokes the city’s urban prairie as a breeding-ground for the type of feral monsters imagined by 1970s filmmakers to prowl the rural spaces of Texas and Nevada. Before the Michigan State tax incentives – offered in 2012 to generate local industry – dried up, many more films lingered gleefully on the ruins of Motor City’s empire, seeming to isolate the city spatially, temporally and philosophically from the rest of the United States.<sup>30</sup>

For most critics, these films slot seamlessly into a vast culture industry that has spent decades mining Detroit for its exemplary strangeness, first as *the* urban dystopia, and latterly as a city forsaken, turned inside out by deindustrialisation and suburban flight. Dubbed ‘Ruin Porn,’ the most recent fascination with Detroit takes many forms, the most prominent being the internationally renowned photography of Moore, Vergara, Marchand and Meffre, which conjures Detroit as something of a modern-day Pompeii, abandoned suddenly and reclaimed by nature.<sup>31</sup> In their frequent juxtaposition of the muted grey-black of crumbling buildings and the lurid green of flourishing moss and bracken, they capture a simultaneously unsettling and beguiling mix of beauty and horror, renewal and despair. Yet the dubious appeal of Detroit’s ruins roves far beyond the visual arts. In 2012, a ‘broad-based effort

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<sup>30</sup> These include Ryan Gosling’s universally panned *Lost River* (2015) and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016, dir. Zack Snyder). The latter casts Motor City as both Metropolis and Gotham City, with Michigan Central Station framing vigilante battles to secure the fate of humanity.

<sup>31</sup> See *The Crow* (1994, dir. Alex Proyas) for a clear example of an urban dystopia.

composed of like-minded, creative professionals' sought funds to transform 200 acres of Detroit's urban prairie – complete with abandoned buildings – into Z World Detroit, a zombie theme park.<sup>32</sup> This fanciful proposal came three years after the History Channel aired a documentary entitled *Life After People* (2009), which considered what various parts of the world might look like without inhabitants. In the ninth episode, the narrator answers his own question, 'What will Detroit look like 40 years after people?' with, 'We already know. It's already happened.'<sup>33</sup>

As the most economically and racially stratified city in the United States, it is perhaps no surprise that Detroit has proved such a rich source of horror and fascination.<sup>34</sup> Yet far from telegraphing the plight of the 700,000-people that continue to inhabit the metropolitan core, almost all of whom are black or Hispanic, this cultural zeitgeist seems peculiarly intent on erasing them from view. Marchand, Meffre and Moore's lovingly rendered portraits of weed-choked houses and sagging architectural marvels are so lacking in human figures that Detroit's decline not only begins to seem somewhat 'organic' and inevitable, but also its social, political and economic function as a city already appears to have been consigned to the past. The few figures that do animate their photographs are dwarfed by the surrounding ruins, transformed into ghostly, disarticulated presences lurking in the background or on the peripheries. For Moore, the ruins of Detroit articulate a more fundamental and poetic story of 'humanity and the natural world locked in a struggle.'<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, for Vergara – who campaigned for an American Acropolis of preserved ruins that would testify to the toppled-greatness and hubris of Fordism – Detroit seems to embody a battle already lost to the ghastly beauty of nature.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Lauren Davis, 'A Proposal for Detroit: Turn a Blighted Neighbourhood into a Giant Zombie Theme Park' <<http://io9.gizmodo.com/5923353/a-proposal-for-detroit-turn-a-blighted-neighborhood-into-a-giant-zombie-theme-park>> [Accessed 6 May 2017].

<sup>33</sup> Louis Tarantino and Doug Cohen (dirs.), 'Roads to Nowhere' (Episode 9), *Life After People* on History Channel, Episode 9 (16 June 2009), Television.

<sup>34</sup> Jessica Rose Purchon, 'The 10 Most Segregated American Cities,' *The Richest*, 13 April 2014, web. <<http://www.therichest.com/rich-list/world/10-most-segregated-american-cities>> [Accessed 19 June 2017].

<sup>35</sup> Nate Millington, *Post-Industrial Imaginaries: Nature, Representation, and Ruin in Detroit, Michigan* (Unpublished MSc Thesis: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Camilo Jose Vergara, *The New American Ghetto* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

Yet this abstracted idea of nature as a non-human force, carrying out cycles of destruction and redemption, creates a false dichotomy between nature and culture, whilst neutralising the human processes that produced Detroit *as* a so-called ‘ruin.’ More importantly, naturalising the city’s decline through a focus on its aesthetic appeal ignores the thousands of people trying to survive within a crumbling infrastructure, and obfuscates the very real effects of disinvestment on their lives. Instead, the abandonment of the city and the extraordinary poverty to which those who remain are exposed is made to seem unavoidable and, to a certain degree, aesthetically pleasing in its magnitude. The site of suffering becomes something to be consumed and enjoyed. Removing Detroit from its spatial and historical specificity, these representations pave the way for its re-conception as a new wilderness, ripe for the projection of myriad imaginary fears and desires.

Though ostensibly observational, Vergara and Moore’s illusions to past magnitude and current destitution are implicitly colour-coded, and speak to the ways in which ruin porn maintains and enhances a racist critique.<sup>37</sup> In her essay ‘Longing for Detroit: The Naturalisation of Racism Through Ruin Porn and Digital Memories’ (2012), Rebecca Kinney rightly observes that ‘the trope of the past greatness of Detroit is essential to the narrative of present-day decay. Without these allusions to the city’s apex, the discourse of Detroit’s ruin would be untenable.’<sup>38</sup> Since Detroit’s socio-economic decline is not simply the result of deindustrialisation or nature’s ascendancy, but a consequence of decades of white flight and corresponding black containment, evoking the process as a ‘fall from grace’ risks inadvertently equating blackness with decline and the collapse of the American Dream.<sup>39</sup> It also implies that Detroit is waiting to be saved. It is worth remembering that Detroit is *not* an entirely disenfranchised city that can be defined by single images, often taken by outsiders, but a complex and multi-faceted metropolis, containing a growing black middle class and a working class that should not be seen as entirely disempowered. Nevertheless,

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<sup>37</sup> Although it is not possible to analyse the work of these photographers in detail, I wish to stress that each is stylistically and ideologically distinct. For coverage, see Miles Orvell, ‘Photographing Disaster,’ *American Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2013), pp. 647-671. Whilst Vergara integrates history, sociology and reportage into his work, writing an accompanying text for each shot, Orvell defines Moore as ‘unabashedly Romantic.’ p.652.

<sup>38</sup> Kinney, p.2.

<sup>39</sup> This is not to suggest that *all* accounts that focus on the conditions in which black Americans live in Detroit, and which portray this process of the collapse of the American dream, correlate blackness and decline: Kathryn Bigelow’s *Detroit* (2017) is but one recent example of a counter-narrative.

the invisibility of Detroit's mainly black populace in visual narratives helps to vindicate the actions of corporations and policy makers who galvanised racial and economic stratification, and legitimises an ongoing official indifference. In the early 1990s, Fredric Jameson contended that it is 'easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism.'<sup>40</sup> The popularity of ruin photography can arguably be explained by its capacity to isolate and marginalise Detroit as a beguiling sacrifice zone that contains the anxiety of socio-economic breakdown.

Of the many forms that have engaged with Detroit in the last decade, the Hollywood horror would seem to be the most exploitative and reductive of all, guilty of transforming precarity into profitable spectacle. Nowhere are these racialised processes of erasure more frankly rendered than in *Vanishing on 7<sup>th</sup> Street*. In one particularly memorable scene, a Latino character trembles beneath the glow of a nearly spent candle, repeating the mantra, 'I exist' to the all-consuming night. It is not a stretch to posit Anderson's film as a neat metaphor for the culmination of decades of divestment, deindustrialisation and white flight. To an extent, therefore, the film functions as a corrective to the purely aesthetic fetishisation of 'the destructive sublime,' attempting to spotlight the bodies that suffer, even as they are in the process of being erased. Yet whilst it goes some way towards highlighting the social reality of the inner-city people it portrays, the film performs another, more fundamental, act of erasure. Indeed, the swiftness with which Anderson's Detroit is turned inside out, and the mystification of the process as the work of shadows, obscures the complex structural inequalities, corporate decisions and incompetent governance that produced its current landscape. Ultimately, there is no justice for the characters that struggle, no shouldering of responsibility and no clear sense of how the city should mobilise against this ongoing crisis. Instead, the film transforms precarity into an aberration – albeit a fluid and intangible one – that can be evaded through flight from the metropolitan core.

Between the release of 2001's *8 Mile* (dir. Curtis Hanson) – a film that deals explicitly with class and racial tensions against the backdrop of Detroit's famous city/suburb, black/white, dystopian/utopian dividing line – and 2017's *Detroit* (dir.

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<sup>40</sup> Apel, p.74.

Kathryn Bigelow), horror replaced urban realism as the genre of choice for representing Detroit. Its popularity seems to indicate a preference for rendering the dividing line between the inner city and everywhere else not only absolute, but also invisible, naturalising structural privilege by insinuating that middle-class Americans were right to flee the city's horrors. In *Don't Breathe*, *It Follows* and *Only Lovers Left Alive*, black and working-class characters have been almost entirely removed from the landscape, and the few that remain are ghostly, muted figures in the blurred background or at the side of the screen. And there is something even more troubling at work in these films. Where *Vanishing on 7<sup>th</sup> Street* eventually evacuates Detroit of its inhabitants altogether, its successors imaginatively repopulate it with monsters, 'zombies' and morally corrupt criminals. It would be reasonable to assume that these physical and moral perversions are metaphorical place-holders for the ghosted precarious community. By imagining both a spatial detachment between the inner city and its surrounding suburbs, *and* a moral one, these films seem to transform socio-economic decline into just another anti-urbanist 'discourse about "human ruins" who are blamed for the damaged condition of their environment.'<sup>41</sup> In doing so, they echo the neoliberal consensus that has justified racist punitive measures and the physical, cultural and political neglect of U.S. cities for decades.

## 4.2. Recent Filmic Interventions

### I. Illuminating the Sacrifice Zone in Fede Alvarez's *Don't Breathe* (2016)

The objectification and violent Othering of the inner city and its inhabitants is perhaps most starkly exemplified by Fede Alvarez's *Don't Breathe*. From the outset, Detroit is depicted as a city to be escaped, and it is the home invaders' desperation to leave that makes them vaguely sympathetic. Meanwhile, to stay is to concede to evil, and the secret that the film's blind antagonist has been harbouring in his crumbling home is unprecedentedly horrifying. In her review of *Don't Breathe*, Justine Smith concludes that the film does nothing to dislodge the widespread and enduring city-as-nightmare trope, 'showcasing Detroit only through collapsing infrastructure and absent or morally corrupt adults.' The city itself remains 'shallow and vague,'

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<sup>41</sup> George Steinmetz, 'Drive-By Shooting: Vision and Division in the Documentation of Detroit,' *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2006), p.503, as qtd. by Apel, p.26.

painted ‘in broad strokes of misery.’<sup>42</sup> Here, I engage, and ultimately refute this overly simplistic view, arguing that Alvarez’s film illuminates the sociology of urban change in Detroit, and considers the morality of the capitalist system in general.

Indeed, not only does the film’s ‘monster’ sport an unnervingly human form, but also occupies a moral grey-area. Moreover, the film reimagines a space so frequently aestheticised by photography as a battleground for individuals trying to survive within the rubble. In ‘Life Preservers: The Neoliberal Enterprise of Hurricane Katrina Survival in *Trouble the Water*, *House M.D.* and *When the Levees Broke*’ (2010), Jane Elliott traces the ‘twin burdens neoliberal subjectivity places on the poor: the insistence on self-empowerment and self-care, and the radical diminishing of material resources with which those living in poverty must undertake this project.’ For the blind man at the centre of Alvarez’s story, long-abandoned by the state, the classic imperative to “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” is gradually exposed as a grotesque burden that he can neither fulfil nor bring himself to entirely renounce.<sup>43</sup> In depicting areas of the city as places where no one can hear you scream, Alvarez is doing more than simply fetishizing them from a distance; he is accurately evoking the collapse of justice, the removal of basic provisions, and the ‘blind eyes’ turned by the police and fire services. As the characters fight to the death in a horrifying materialisation of ‘neoliberal self-responsibilization [...] in the absence of government support,’ the film becomes much more than a portrait of an irredeemable maniac: it is a tale of structural disenfranchisement and desperation that cannot be purged.<sup>44</sup> *Don’t Breathe* demands that its audience bear witness to the gap between those empowered to shape collective ways of seeing, and those who have been positioned as the silent scrutinised.

Like numerous films about American suburbia, *Don’t Breathe* opens with an aerial shot of a coherent, grid-like landscape that sprawls all the way to the horizon. In the

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<sup>42</sup> Justine Smith, ‘Detroit: The New City of American Horror,’ [www.rogerebert.com](http://www.rogerebert.com/balder-and-dash/detroit-the-new-city-of-american-horror), 24 August 2016, web. <<http://www.rogerebert.com/balder-and-dash/detroit-the-new-city-of-american-horror>> [Accessed 6 May 2017].

<sup>43</sup> Jane Elliott, ‘Life Preservers: The Neoliberal Enterprise of Hurricane Katrina. Survival in *Trouble the Water*, *House M.D.* and *When the Levees Broke*,’ *Old and New Media After Katrina*, ed. by Diane Negra (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp.89-111, p.96.

<sup>44</sup> Elliott, p.90.

far distance, skyscrapers catch the glint of the morning sun, and the sound of birdsong is broken only by a remote siren signifying some far-removed discord. As the camera begins its descent, however, any notion that Detroit boasts a familiar, intelligible landscape is destroyed. Even before viewers get close enough to see the solitary, hunched figure dragging a lifeless body down the road, it becomes clear that lawns are unkempt, the pavement is cracked, and the middle-class houses are empty husks. At ground level, we realise, with horror, that what had appeared to be a fissure in the tarmac is a trail of the victim's blood. She is white, blonde and young. Her attacker remains a shadowy figure, carrying an axe, grunting bestially and seen only in profile. There seems to be no question that she is dead. A quiet suburban street is transformed into a barren outpost at the edge of the world.

The effect is deeply disorientating. Indeed, whilst fans of science fiction have long been accustomed to filmic depictions of post-apocalyptic cities – with their gutted skyscrapers and toppled monuments – the ruined suburb has little visual precedent. In the 1980s and 90s, suburban horrors tended either to embrace the trope of degeneracy lurking beneath a veneer of architectural homogeneity and social security, or to conjure assaults from hostile urban outsiders. In *Don't Breathe*, it is no longer clear where the boundaries between city and suburb, degenerate loner and decaying space are to be drawn, and visual motifs of grid-like streets and square front lawns do not yield to expectations.

Later in the film it becomes clear that this monstrous place is located within a pocket of the city's urban prairie, the almost completely vacant land, dotted with endless grassy fields and abandoned properties, that makes up a growing percentage of the city's inner-ring suburbs.<sup>45</sup> In the opening scene, however, the horror has distinctly *rural* associations, evocative of the spate of backwoodsman films – including *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974, dir. Tobe Hooper) – popularised during the 1970s and reinvigorated in the early 2000s. These follow strikingly similar narrative arcs; naïve city-dwellers take a wrong turning down a country lane and are set-upon by savages. Linnie Blake observes that 'the United States has a very long history of representing

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<sup>45</sup> According to Binelli, Detroit 'shed 25% of its population in the first decade of the twenty-first century,' p.28. Binelli describes these areas as tumours that cover the body of Detroit, so small and spread out as to be impossible to amputate.

the inhabitants of its own isolated rural places [...] as monstrous, grotesque, diseased and polluted;’ an interesting mirror-image of popular depictions of the urbanite, which could lead one to conclude that only the suburb is safe to inhabit.<sup>46</sup> Such cultural representations emerged after the Revolutionary War as a means of negotiating fears about those who lived beyond the reach of the government, and who apparently did not invest in ‘Protestant virtues of sobriety, thrift, Christian morality and hard work.’<sup>47</sup> Depicting the backwoodsman as sociobiologically degenerate helped to manage an otherwise physically and conceptually subversive figure that threatened ‘exceptionalist models of American identity.’<sup>48</sup> For all the attempts to domesticate him, however, the backwoodsman continued to haunt the cultural imagination, often brought out at times of crisis to embody both liberal and conservative fears about the coherence of national identity.<sup>49</sup>

Whilst placing a figure considered impermeable to the forces of progress and enlightenment within a metropolitan setting seems incongruous with the backwoodsman’s ‘outsider’ status, *Don’t Breathe* is not without precedent. Indeed, certain areas of Detroit’s urban prairie report fewer instances of muggings than attacks from wild dogs. And in Highland Park, the film’s setting, the total absence of emergency services has led to repeated bouts of arson that have turned turn-of-the-century mansions into charred carcasses. What *is* significant is the visual and semantic refrain that repeatedly transforms pockets of Detroit into exemplary spaces inhabited by the psychotic, pathologically idle or plain feral. In the conclusion to *Post-industrial Imaginaries: Nature, Representation, and Ruin in Detroit, Michigan* (2010), Nate Millington cites Detroit’s ‘Coon Man’ as an example of single cases being made to speak for the whole. So-called due to his hunting and selling of

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<sup>46</sup> Linnie Blake, ‘I Am the Devil and I’m Here to do the Devil’s Work: Rob Zombie, George W. Bush, and the Limits of American Freedom,’ *Horror After 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror*, ed. by Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller (Texas: Texas University Press, 2011), pp.186-200, p.188.

<sup>47</sup> It is worth stressing that, in a nation in which anti-government feeling is strong and present in electoral politics, being ‘beyond the reach of government’ also has a long history of being romanticised and glorified in U.S. culture, from the western to Thoreau’s reflections on civil disobedience. Representations of degeneracy exist on a spectrum, the opposite pole of which is occupied by the ambivalently heroic figure of the outlaw or cowboy.

<sup>48</sup> Blake, p.188.

<sup>49</sup> Blake suggests that the backwoodsman’s popularity during the 1970s testifies to both liberal and conservative fears about the Vietnam War. On one side, the figure spoke to left-wing bewilderment about the acts of savagery being perpetrated in the name of the United States. On the other, he represented the subversive, dissenting outsider who threatened political unity, p.189.



raccoon meat, 'Coon Man' has become something of a celebrity in recent years, appearing in national newspapers about the city's 'rewilding.' According to Millington, his fame has 'prompted a minor outcry by Detroiters, most of whom do not actually hunt raccoons [...] and are somewhat wary of the racial connotations of the term.' Arguably, his popularity attests to a desire to understand Detroit as 'a kind of rural city, a place whose devastation is so thorough that it threatens to blur divisions between the natural and the urban.'<sup>50</sup> Alternatively, it speaks to a need to denigrate Detroit itself, and the people inside it, to a mythological status. At best, Coon Man embodies a racially coded image of resourceful pioneers in a revolutionary post-urban space. At worst, he is deployed as a mockery of a backwards – and potentially violent – community, unwilling or unable to keep abreast of socio-cultural change.

Ostensibly, *Don't Breathe* has none of this ambiguity of intention. In the months before its release, the film's poster campaign positioned it as a cautionary tale about residents of debatable lingering humanity. In one poster, wolfish arms emerge from the darkness to cover the screaming mouth of an attractive young woman. In another, a dilapidated rural mansion, not at all reminiscent of Detroit's actual architecture, is approached by three well-dressed teenagers. A ghostly figure watches from the attic window as mists rise from the surrounding woodland. Above the house, huge, clouded, unseeing eyes announce the zombie-like entity that lurks within. Clearly, the marketing campaign does all it can to evoke the house as an isolated, alien place containing a horrifying, non-human presence: even the caption reads, 'This house looked an easy target, until they found *what* was inside.'<sup>51</sup> It is an opening gambit that transforms the poor, the jobless, the economically and socially derailed, into gruesomely entertaining, braindead spectacles, incapable of taking responsibility for their own lives.

Having been set up to pathologise both the film's 'mythical' setting and its monstrous inhabitant before the film even starts, viewers are appalled to discover that the former is a real city, whilst the latter is no more than an angry, blind war

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<sup>50</sup> Millington, p.84.

<sup>51</sup> My italics.

veteran left to rot with scant support from the state. Meanwhile, the fact that his house is under assault from hostile, but equally complex, outsiders stands as a revealing metaphor for the people in Detroit who are not permitted to determine the fate of the land they live on. Far from embracing a reactionary critique, *Don't Breathe* arguably deconstructs the distinctly American tropes of the zombie and the backwoodsman, long perpetuated by Hollywood, and draws attention to the ways in which the privileged so readily alienate, fear and blame those whose power to tell their own stories has already been revoked.

*Don't Breathe*'s challenging of viewers' assumptions – about the dividing line between city and suburb, perpetrator and victim, loci of destitution and wealth – begins almost immediately. Following the opening scene, the camera cuts to a luxurious, blindingly white suburban interior, in the seconds before it is burgled. That viewers are *inside* the house is telling, since it invokes them as members of the suburban upper-middle class, primed to be besieged. Before the door is thrown open, the film resembles any number of home invasion stories from the early 2000s, whose victimised families are part of a 'rich but generalised middle class' and whose 'homes are remarkably opulent.'<sup>52</sup> Tracing the waxing and waning popularity of the genre – from comedies like *Home Alone* (1990, dir. Chris Columbus) to horrors like *Funny Games* (2007, dir. Michael Haneke) – over the last forty years, James Morrison observes that earlier treatments were straightforwardly class-orientated, with the home-owning family embodying virtue and middle-class values, and the marauders representing 'resentful, licentious, unprincipled and debauched refugees from the underclasses,' who temporarily succeed in breaching class barriers and threatening the sanctity of those values.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, any threat is overcome, and faith in increasingly high-tech security systems as protectors of family values is restored. For Morrison, the only fundamental shift in the genre between the 1960s and the 1990s is that later films take serious wealth as a new norm, simultaneously reflecting widening class inequalities and denying them even more strenuously.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> James Morrison, 'Hostages and Houseguests: Class and Family in the New Screen Gothic,' *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home*, ed. by Murray Pomerance (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp.189-210, p.189.

<sup>53</sup> Morrison, p.189.

<sup>54</sup> In *Panic Room*, director David Fincher depicts a 'neo-aristocracy, posing as a latter-day version of the 'new middle classes.' Morrison, p.190. Dazzling its audience with new technologies, the film

More unsettlingly, most continue to embody a sublimated racist fear of invasion from a dark Other that is assuaged in the concluding scenes. In 2002's *Panic Room* (dir. David Fincher), for example, the film's one black actor – initially one of the invaders – is transformed into an unlikely saviour, in what Morrison considers to be 'one long, feverish apology for propagating ideologies it still cannot renounce.'<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, the exclusively white home-owners must wake up from their placid consumption-orientated existence and embrace a return to 'rugged American individualism' if they want to reclaim their territory from shadowy foreign threats. By the early 2000s, mask-wearing psychopaths had become the new norm. For Morrison, the suggestion of a 'depersonalized takeover reflects the rise in fears of globalization and a loss of "American" culture.' And certainly, there is no more transparent a metaphor for threats to the sovereignty of the nation state than a depiction of a 'literal foreign element entering your self-contained domain.'<sup>56</sup>

It is a surprise, therefore, that the door to *Don't Breathe*'s lavish suburban home opens to reveal neither a masked hoodlum nor the shadowy, homicidal figure seen moments before, but rather his blonde victim and her two male friends. All three are white, though this is not immediately apparent. In fact, stereotypical visual and audio cues initially point to the tattooed, corn-rowed figure – nicknamed Money – being black. Only much later in the scene does it become clear that these equivocal markers of ethnicity are nothing more than empty signifiers and cultural appropriation. The effect is to confront viewers with the slipping points between their expectations and the reality, making them acutely aware of their own role in the process of racialising poverty and crime in Detroit. In a further subversion of type, the film refuses to embrace a conservative morality that paints the invaders as the villains of the piece. Instead of instilling fear, the three disenfranchised teenagers – Money, Rocky and Alex – generate interest and sympathy, revealed to be motivated by insolvency and lack of agency. Through a series of external shots of buildings – including Rocky's inner-city trailer-park and the abandoned Packard Plant where

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pointedly obscures the social backgrounds of its characters. Instead, the invaders are greedy and undisciplined, whilst their victims are resourceful for using their affluence to outwit their opponents.

<sup>55</sup> Morrison, p.189.

<sup>56</sup> Morrison, p.190.

they meet – Alvarez builds a portrait of isolated, unconnected spaces that are recognisable for having been so frequently objectified from a distance by ruin photographers. Yet he recreates such totalising images only to immediately swoop inside the spaces to uncover the lives within. Doing so not only draws attention to the fact that Detroit is a highly contested discursive construction – its spatiality produced ‘in the realm of representation as much as it is a result of spatial configuration’ – but also creates a sense of place based on *more* than static visual images.<sup>57</sup> It is within Rocky’s trailer park home that the viewers’ conflicted, reluctant sympathies evolve into something more tangible.<sup>58</sup> Though the characters’ poverty is devastating, it is by no means monstrous.

Nevertheless, Alvarez refuses to evoke a similarly limited, collective consciousness as a plausible alternative to reductive and totalising imagery. Any pity for this trio of thieves locked in a bleak hand-to-mouth existence is severely tested when it is revealed that their next victim is to be an elderly, disabled and grieving father, whose daughter was killed by a car driven by a wealthy white teenager. According to Money’s tip-off, the pay-out he received in an out-of-court settlement is stored in his crumbling home. All cues invoke the viewers’ sympathies: the man is described in the film’s credits simply as ‘blind man,’ but a photograph reveals that he lives in a carefully maintained and stridently cheerful property in what Alex describes as an otherwise derelict ‘ghost town.’ On encountering the man – first as he walks his dog amongst the empty spaces where houses once were, and later inside his property as he sleeps – his vulnerability is palpable. And yet, there is no question that this is the shadowy, murderous figure seen at the start of the film; his inexplicable success, and the trio’s failure, is already set in stone.

Crucially, Alvarez is at pains to create a topos-based portrait of Detroit; as the trio swoop in to scope out the ironically named ‘1837 Buena Vista Street,’ the camera lingers on street signs that reveal its exact location. This technique is crucial to complicating any early suggestion that the film’s antagonist is a manifestation of

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<sup>57</sup> Ian Robinson, ‘Searching for the City: Cinema and the Critique of Urban Space in the Films of Keiller, Cohen, and Steinmetz and Chanan,’ *The City and the Moving Image*, ed. by Richard Koeck and Les Roberts (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp.114-124, p.120.

<sup>58</sup> Here, Rocky’s drunken mother and stepfather make lewd comments in front of their angelic five-year-old daughter, who, like her sister, dreams about leaving Detroit.

pure evil, inhabiting a vague and monstrous place. Instead, the film illuminates the bleak realities of Michigan's poorest city, in the three-square-mile, self-administered municipality of Highland Park, an area long kept in the dark both symbolically and literally.<sup>59</sup> It is not hard to envision the man's blindness as a metaphor for a state of being kept out of sight and mind. The fact that he lost his sight fighting for his country during the second Gulf War is all the more significant, since it equates the social invisibility of Detroit's disenfranchised with U.S. attempts to render invisible the casualties of war. In both cases, 'erasing the human is a strategy meant to quell dissent, cultivate complacency, and garner support for dominant political policy.'<sup>60</sup>

In a telling slip of the tongue when describing the man's ill-gotten gains, Money mispronounces 'settlement' as 'sediment' – a word that literally means 'dregs' or 'matter that settles to the bottom.' Just like the thieves, this blind man is a member of a disposable community. Indeed, though the man is quickly revealed to be a ruthless, skilled dispenser of 'justice,' willing to shoot one of the invaders on contact, there is no inherent sadism to his initial actions, and he experiences a tangible regret afterwards. More poignant is the revelation of just how little he has to protect. Entering the house with the thieves, the camera flies down dusty hallways and up through floorboards, giving viewers privileged access to what the trio cannot yet see: the man sleeping as a VCR plays old videos of his daughter; a gun strapped to the bottom of his bed; a locked basement. It is at once sad and threatening. To viewers – granted a God-like omnipotence – nothing is invisible, and everything is pre-ordained: there is no choice but to watch, and be quietly complicit. Unlike photographic ruin porn, the film disguises none of the machinery that has led, and will continue to lead, the characters towards their demise. As such, it offers a rare and emotionally realistic exploration of socioeconomic pain and guilt.

Alvarez almost immediately destroys any notion of his home invasion thriller as a xenophobic parable, or of the house itself as a metaphorical America worth

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<sup>59</sup> For years, the first-ring suburb of Highland Park was a healthy independent city within the borders of metropolitan Detroit. However, as industrialisation and white flight took hold, population dropped and crime spiked. In 2009, rent-paying tenants of Highland Park Tower paid the price for their landlord's bankruptcy when Detroit Edison cut the power to their homes. Nine years later, those who were not bussed out of the city are still living off-grid.

<sup>60</sup> Apel, p.135.

protecting. Instead, *Don't Breathe*'s America is a shaky, decaying shell, held together by nihilism and blind willpower, and which the disenfranchised characters only enter through sheer desperation. Though Alex and Rocky are presented with several opportunities to leave the house, their hunger remains stronger than their fear for their lives, and they linger in the hope of uncovering the blind man's elusive hidden riches. Tellingly, in a film with very little dialogue, most conversations revolve around money. For long sections, the film plays out in real time, with the characters trapped in relentless, agonising cycles of fight or flight in increasingly claustrophobic spaces. In a particularly striking scene, the two remaining thieves, Alex and Rocky, stand face-to-face with the blind homeowner, not breathing for fear of being discovered. It is almost impossible to determine who is the predator and who is prey: in fact, only viewers have full control of their faculties at any given time. Such mutual vulnerability makes for extremely uncomfortable viewing.

Only in the final quarter does the film begin to circulate an unequivocally conservative discourse. As the blind man navigates his decaying fortress, he starts to exhibit strangely bestial or preternatural qualities, including an ability to smell his characters from a great distance. Such behaviour not only invokes the 'familiar ablest trope of the inscrutable, prescient or deranged disabled person, which is particularly common in horror films,' but also transforms a socio-economically vulnerable figure into a singular, mutant strain of urbanite that has evolved to thrive in the darkness.<sup>61</sup> It is only moments later that viewers – along with the other characters – learn of the living girl trapped in the man's basement. This gagged, voiceless figure is the wealthy young woman whose car struck and killed his daughter, and who was later cleared of vehicular manslaughter. In a grotesque perversion of an eye-for-an-eye justice, she has been kidnapped and artificially inseminated with his sperm because, as he explains, 'Cindy took my child away from me. I thought it only fair that she gives me a new one. You have to be held accountable.' Though his claim that 'she should've gone to prison, but rich girls don't go to jail' resonates with a systematic injustice, his sexually violent reaction belongs to a category that cannot possibly be justified by his circumstances. At this

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<sup>61</sup> Sean Desilets, *Hermeneutic Humility and the Political Theology of Cinema: Blind Paul* (New York: Routledge, 2017), unpaginated.

point, he ceases to be a morally compromised figure whose ‘victimhood is part of his villainy,’ and becomes an aberrant individual who plays to reactionary fears about the breakdown of the family, morality and social order in the neglected inner city.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, viewers have no choice but to realign their sympathies with those longing to abandon a house – and by extension, a city – whose violent crime is apparently caused by individual psychosis rather than systemic socio-economic forces.<sup>63</sup> For all its early success in shifting the focus from individual monsters to a structural threat that cannot simply be erased, the film ultimately falls back on sacrificing disposable communities to the cause. The blind man becomes the monster that can be symbolically exorcised in order that viewers might return to their position of blameless structural privilege.

Nevertheless, the film does at least imply that the monster cannot be cast out. On escaping the house, Rocky, the last survivor, looks back to see the man hesitating in the doorway, blinking in the glare of the morning sun. ‘You’re worthless out here,’ she yells as she flees, symbolically confining him to a single, corrupted fortress of solitude, the only place in which he might exercise some control. Yet his sphere of influence is *not* tied to his crumbling mansion; Rocky’s temporary recapture in the urban wastelands beyond, and the fact that she is never *shown* leaving Detroit, arguably represents a refusal to fulfil social expectations or recreate singular sacrifice zones.<sup>64</sup> Further, the revelation that the film’s main protagonist was *not* fated to die from the outset emphasises that the privileged observer is not, in fact, all-seeing and all-knowing.

Ultimately, the film only partially obscures the deeper causes of socio-economic decline. Shortly before Rocky exits the scene, she watches a news report that clearly distorts the reality of the crimes she perpetrated and experienced. As a frail-looking

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<sup>62</sup> Jia Tolentino, ‘The Twisted Appeal of *Don’t Breathe*,’ *The New Yorker*, 13 September 2016 <<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-twisted-appeal-of-dont-breathe>> [Accessed 6 May 2017]; Macek, p.250.

<sup>63</sup> Binelli links the claim that corrupt black leadership is to blame for Detroit’s decline to the ‘foreign policy of isolating enemy states, labelling the leader a tyrant then watching him become one when the regime begins to crumble under the pressure of the embargo,’ p.113.

<sup>64</sup> The final scene depicts her grasping the hand of her younger sister as they search for the bus that will transport them to California.

individual is stretchered out of his property, a newsreader reports on the fact that a local war hero has bravely defended himself against two armed attackers, killing them on the spot. Though the blind man is clearly portrayed as the victim, it is hard to swallow the idea that society truly cares about someone whose silence they have bought. The palpable cheeriness of the reporter does not evoke genuine concern so much as relief that the disenfranchised have succeeded in depleting their own numbers. Drawing his viewers – who he positions, somewhat problematically, as privileged suburban outsiders – into the most destitute parts of Detroit, Alvarez provokes contemplation of its most wilfully ignored or objectified spaces, and of the bodies that have been failed by the state. Through processes of mirroring and subverting expectations, it exposes the mechanics behind the predominantly white cultural construction of the urban prairie as an exoticised, vilified Other.

Nevertheless, in positioning viewers as privileged outsiders, the film generates questions about who has the right to speak for the apparently voiceless. In the following section, I examine a film that understands precarity as a polymorphic, existential horror from which neither the suburban characters nor the viewers are immune. In Mitchell's *It Follows*, Detroit can no longer be parcelled into a collection of non-continuous spaces – some privileged, some disposable – which remain resolutely separate from the outside world. Instead, the film maps a post-metropolis whose borders are exposed as fragile and ultimately unreal. Sent on the run from an amorphous threat that can take any human form, suburbanite Jay and her naïve friends have access to a mobility that her fictional predecessors could only dream of. And yet, as they flee in their cars from suburb to city, and from dilapidated ruins to coastal cottages, they find no relief: wherever they go, the monster slowly, determinedly pursues them. Here, the suburb is no longer a refuge from post-industrial decay, and attempts at white flight only enhance misery. In recent years, Detroit's suburbs have been confronted with plunging property values, foreclosures and the steady migration of business back to parts of the increasingly prosperous urban core. In the end, the problem cannot be evaded or repelled. Instead, Jay and her friends must face and eventually accept the problems once symbolically relegated to the inner city.



## II. Stalked by Precarity: Suburban Guilt and Post-Metropolitan Permeability in David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2015)

In *A Sense of Place on the Silver Screen* (2009), Philip C. Dolce outlines the cinematic suburb as 'an overwhelmingly closed, visual construction focused in the single family, detached house and the middle-class nuclear family. This sense of place is so powerful that even when severely tested it resists change.'<sup>65</sup> For Timotheus Vermeulen, Dolce's critical emphasis on suburban iconography is at once highly conventional and enormously limited, since it does not address the ways in which editing, geography, mise-en-scene, stylistic register and language might contribute to delineating, or indeed problematising, suburbia in film.<sup>66</sup> It also fails to comprehend the suburb as a 'structure of feeling,' with a definable 'quality of social experience which can be observed in manners, dress, buildings, and social life.'<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, both critics agree that the cinematic suburb can be more easily defined in relation to other fictional suburbs than in comparison to actual spaces.

When it comes to horror, the visual logic of the suburb has seldom been in doubt. In *Halloween* (1978, dir. John Carpenter) – a film that codified the slasher sub-genre – the suburb is a generic and banal landscape, whose 'familiarity' supposedly makes the horror that lurks within it infinitely more disturbing.<sup>68</sup> Discussing the film in an interview, Carpenter reveals that he selected a suburban setting because it 'is supposed to be safe, [...] if horror can get there, it can get anywhere.'<sup>69</sup> His depiction of monstrous forces permeating a recognisably suburban location refuses middle-class viewers the opportunity of Othering and symbolically escaping the space once the film has finished. In the end, Oliver Innocent notes, the suburban house is exposed as 'nothing more than a nicely decorated cave. [...] Once all the lights have

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<sup>65</sup> Philip C. Dolce, 'A Sense of Place on the Silver Screen,' *Redefining Suburban Studies: Searching for New Paradigms*, ed. by D. Rubey (Hempstead: Hofstra University Press, 2009), pp.159-60, as qtd. by Timotheus Vermeulen, *Scenes from the Suburbs: The Suburb in Contemporary US Film and Television* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.39.

<sup>66</sup> Vermeulen, p.77.

<sup>67</sup> Vermeulen, p.77.

<sup>68</sup> I use scare quotes because this landscape is only familiar to a subset of the white middle class. Even then, the familiarity comes from other films that depict the suburbs in similar, if fictitious, ways.

<sup>69</sup> John Carpenter, interviewed by Clive Barker, *Clive Barker's A-Z of Horror* (London: BBC Books, 1997), p64, as qtd. by Oliver Innocent, 'An Eye on Horror: Suburbs, Shapes and Scare Tactics,' *On the Edge Films*, 18 October 2014 <<https://ontheedgefilms2012.wordpress.com/2014/10/18/eye-on-horror-suburbs-shapes-and-scare-tactics-halloween/>> [Accessed 6 May 2017].

been turned out and darkness descends, there is barely any difference.’<sup>70</sup> Yet, for all the horrors it can accommodate, the fact remains that the structure of the ‘cave’ itself is not in question, and the iconography of the landscape never fails to remind the audience where – and when – they are. At the same time, despite the mythology that surrounds killer Michael Myers, and notwithstanding his own attempts to render himself faceless and amorphous, his unmasking in the concluding scenes has the effect of transforming an intangible, anonymous threat into a singular, more manageable one.<sup>71</sup>

The opening sequence of David Robert Mitchell’s *It Follows* has several of the traits of what Carol Clover calls the ‘immensely generative story of a psycho killer who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims’ in a suburban safe-haven.<sup>72</sup> Seconds in, a 360-degree panning shot of a manicured street in affluent Sterling Heights captures the moment a terrified teenage girl flings open her front door and races across the lawn. She is a jarring sight, dressed in nothing but a white silk camisole and red high-heels; she is a combination of innocence and experience that recalls the slasher tradition of evoking newly acquired sexual experience as fatal. Pausing momentarily to stare at the source of her horror, located somewhere off-screen, the girl then sprints back towards her house, as though duty-bound to complete the orbit. Moments later, she re-emerges and flees the scene in her car, looking over her shoulder at every opportunity. The next morning, her bloodless, broken body is revealed on a beach, miles from her suburban home, the headlights of her car still shining redundantly onto her corpse. One of her legs has been bent towards her at such a grotesque angle that she is brought face-to-face with her own feet, forming a perfect circle.

Unlike its slasher predecessors, at no point is the identity, motivation or history of what has stalked her revealed. Instead, the threat remains at once a-historical, invisible and all-pervasive, capable of transcending the boundaries between spaces

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<sup>70</sup> Innocent, web.

<sup>71</sup> Of course, Myers is a particularly persistent threat, who survives for several sequels.

<sup>72</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p.21, as qtd. by Adam Lowenstein, ‘A Detroit Landscape with Figures: The Subtractive Horror of “It Follows,”’ *Annual Pittsburgh Lecture*, Birkbeck, University of London, 25 November 2016.

with as much ease as its car-owning prey. It is not merely the impossibility of acknowledging, and thus potentially domesticating, the threat that throws viewers immediately off balance. In absolute contrast to the 'static mise-en-scene' that Timotheus Vermeulen rightly notes is associated with earlier suburban films, Mitchell's camera disorients with its relentless 360-degree mobility, confounding efforts to fix the spatiality of the scene and implying that all areas are equally vulnerable.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, any sense of the temporal order of the landscape is problematised from the outset. Whilst the lush green grass of the victim's front lawn initially suggests a summer setting, the other side of the street is littered with leaves and dotted with pumpkins, implying Autumn. In the seconds it takes her to circle back to her house, daylight begins to give way to dusk. In the absence of a specific monster or graphic murder, or even of a tangible paranormal entity, the suburban landscape arguably emerges as the principal source of horror, foregrounded as a newly unstable and changeable force.

The difficulty of processing or mapping spatial and temporal boundaries continues throughout. Following the murder, the narrative initially appears to relocate to a suburb of the recognisable past: shot on grainy 35-mm, the film takes on a dreamlike, nostalgic quality, an effect which is only enhanced by the mise-en-scene. A blonde teenage girl floats in an iconic suburban swimming pool, drinking Coca-Cola from an old-fashioned can. Later, by the soft glow of a lava lamp, this beautiful creature readies herself for a date at an art-deco movie palace by donning pink lipstick. Her boyfriend, when he arrives, is driving a mint-condition 1975 Plymouth Gran Fury, a car produced by one of Detroit's major manufacturers. Accompanying the action is a synth-soundtrack that pays direct homage to John Carpenter. No one in these opening scenes is black. Yet the temporal reference points just as quickly divide and proliferate. Inside her house, Jay's sister and friends watch a selection of black-and-white 1950s monster movies on a clunky television set from the 1980s, whilst one reads Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* (1869) on a positively futuristic clam-shell e-reader. The anachronisms are not even consistent; across the road, their friend Greg's house has none of the ugly 1970s appliances found at Jay's. Though the presence of resolutely modern items at his house reminds viewers that this *must* be

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<sup>73</sup> Vermeulen, p.23.

the present, it is impossible to discern how this peculiarly liminal space relates to other past, present or future spaces: Jay's home town emerges less as a 'real' – or even realistic – space than as a timeless, jumbled accretion of cultural reference points. Gazing into this self-referential cinematic space, filled with familiar icons rendered suddenly uncanny, viewers are brought face-to-face with the fundamentally illusory nature of Detroit's suburban dream.

The cumulative effect of so many outdated items is a feeling of slow suburban putrefaction. As Casey Ryan Kelly notes, the disruption of temporal logic transforms Jay's suburb into 'a kind of purgatory,' whose inhabitants are trapped somewhere between prosperity and poverty, industrial prime and post-industrial despair.<sup>74</sup> The fact that they have surrounded themselves with products that mainly date back to Detroit's mid-century zenith, when the flourishing auto-industry nurtured a burgeoning middle class, at once invokes an *unwillingness* to renounce a dying view of the suburbs as safe and prosperous, and an *inability* to stay afloat in socio-economic terms.<sup>75</sup> Though there are few allusions to outright destitution, Mitchell subtly invokes Jay's once-middle-class suburb as a space no longer capable of buttressing the gap between the poverty-stricken inner city and its wealthier, more peripheral suburbs. An opening shot depicts a gutter filled with both sand – presumably from Detroit's affluent suburban coastline – and stereotypically urban detritus: car oil, condoms, rubbish. Meanwhile, Jay's pool is filled with leaves and bugs, and nature seems to be sprouting in between the cracks in the pavement. Though the wealthier teenage characters inherit their parents' vintage cars – once considered potent symbols of wealth and power by Detroit's suburban community – there appears to be no contemporary equivalent; Jay, for example, must make do with a clapped-out 1990s model and a bicycle. It is not a stretch to posit this as a vote of no confidence in recent efforts to rejuvenate Detroit through the same single industry that lost out to the global market decades earlier. Long before the monster begins to remove individuals from the landscape, Mitchell evokes a middle class that has been dying for some time, its teenage characters trapped in a world that they cannot make their own.

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<sup>74</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, p.236.

<sup>75</sup> Tellingly, the film that Jay and her boyfriend see is called *Charade*.

Particularly striking about these opening scenes is the almost total absence of parental role-models, and the burgeoning awareness on the part of their children that they have inherited a space that is literally and philosophically collapsing around them. On the rare occasions that adults do appear on screen, they remain largely silent, unfathomable, and literally out of focus. Jay's mother, for example, appears just twice, first sitting with her back to the camera and nursing a glass of wine, and later sleeping in the middle of the afternoon, a bottle of pills at her bedside. In the opening scene, meanwhile, the victim's father is more bemused than worried about his daughter's erratic behaviour, and she is left to await her fate alone on the beach.

Inert and redundant, these parental figures offer little in the way of nurture or guidance, and the teenagers seem to know instinctively not to turn to them for help. Whilst Jay is on her fated date with Hugh, her sister and friends sit playing Old Maid on their porch whilst her mother sleeps inside. One, Yara, reads aloud from *The Idiot*, 'I think that if one is faced by inevitable destruction – if a house is falling upon you, for instance – one must feel a great longing to sit down, close one's eyes and wait, come what may.' 'That's why we're drinking on the porch,' responds her friend, dryly, invoking the teenagers' liminal position on the cusp of an adulthood that will involve retreating inside a crumbling structure to await their demise. The game itself – the object of which is to pass on the curse of the Old Maid – is significant, invoking an endless, mundane circularity and deferral of burden to the next in line, something that their parents' generation appears to have enacted literally. This is not to suggest, however, that the adult figures are resolutely to blame for their predicament. Jay's absent mother is neither figured as a symbol of a heartless adult world nor as a paradigm of a restrictive suburban domesticity, but as a vulnerable individual who must work endlessly just to survive, and for whom feelings of destitution have become quotidian.

It is a profound symbol of the erosion of faith in the notion of continuing progress and upward mobility that Jay contracts the film's central curse on the backseat of a Detroit-made car, which is a machine so pivotal to the rise and fall of Motor City, and which once so clearly united physical movement with notions of socio-economic mobility. In the moments before Jay is confronted with the manifestation of her

destiny, she becomes deeply philosophical, observing that physical and existential freedom do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. Revealing that her dreams as a child were all about ‘driv[ing] around with friends in their cars [...] along some pretty road, up north maybe,’ Jay stresses that ‘it was never about going anywhere really, it was about having some sort of freedom. Now that we’re old enough, where the hell do we go?’ Her words not only imply resentment about having been shielded from more worldly experiences through artificial suburban boundaries, but also suggest that the meagre social and economic ‘freedoms’ of lower-middle-class adulthood do not yield satisfaction or the promise of betterment.

Interestingly, throughout the film, the characters never allude to having left Michigan. Later, fleeing a monster that merely *walks* towards them, the teenagers only make it as far as Detroit’s shoreline, as though neither their economic means nor their imaginations will allow them to travel further. In fact, on the one occasion when Jay ventures *beyond* her circumscribed space to enter the lake and swim to a boat, the camera cuts out, reminiscent of the moment when Truman Burbank’s boat crashes into the edge of the hermetically sealed stage-set in which he has spent his entire life. What is beyond simply cannot be rendered visible. As Adam Lowenstein notes, mobility is ‘reconfigured here in a neoliberal age as an imperative: you *must* keep moving otherwise you will get ground under the wheels of life.’ And yet, in this ‘closed system,’ there is no longer any scope to move up the socio-economic ladder, and characters must run in circles to stay alive.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps therefore, the monster that stalks Jay and her friends is no more than a physical manifestation of a ghoulish ‘perpetual-motion machine’ that has been bringing its ill-prepared and inexperienced victims ‘face to face with [their] own feet’ for some time.<sup>77</sup> It appears at precisely the moment when these teenage characters, inhabiting the liminal space between innocence and experience, childhood excitement and adult cynicism, begin to recognise that they can neither return to youthful feelings of invincibility nor see anything worthwhile ahead of them. Shortly before he passes the curse to Jay, Hugh

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<sup>76</sup> Lowenstein, *Annual Pittsburgh Lecture*. In fact, the film is full of allusions to circles: the 360-degree shots; the circularity of the Old Maid game; the stagnant round swimming pool; and the figure-of-8 Jay sketches in her ice-cream with a spoon.

<sup>77</sup> Leslie Jamison, “‘It Follows’ and the Transgressive Pleasure of the Horror Movie,” *Slate.com*, 4 April 2015  
<[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/04/it\\_follows\\_and\\_the\\_transgressive\\_pleasure\\_of\\_the\\_horror\\_movie.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/04/it_follows_and_the_transgressive_pleasure_of_the_horror_movie.html)> [Accessed 6 May 2017].

muses, ‘How cool would that be, to have your whole life ahead of you?’ before being reminded by Jay that he is only twenty-one. What ‘It’ brings is an awareness of one’s own fragility.

Parked in front of the dilapidated Packard Factory – itself a space between, combining the horrors of urban blight with the otherworldly quality of nature ascendant – Hugh has sex with and then attacks Jay, strapping her temporarily to a wheelchair, a crude symbol of stasis, so that he can explain what will follow. Hugh has passed on a sexual curse, making Jay the target of a malevolent, but empty-headed being that will stalk her indefinitely, ceasing only when it catches and kills her, or is passed on through sexual contact. It is easy to see why so many critics have construed the curse as a straightforward AIDS metaphor that taps into fears about what Sontag calls the ‘alarming realities of the global village, the world in which everything is in perpetual circulation, the goods and garbage.’<sup>78</sup> Certainly, on the surface, the film rehashes the trope of sexual panic by equating promiscuity with threat. The fact that white cinematic ideal Jay contracts the disease in the shadow of a wrecked inner-city factory does little to diffuse culturally inspired fears of the city as the source of degeneration and decay that threatens a middle-class way of life.

Arguably, the film even embraces a paranoiac connection between disease and the blackness of inner-city Detroit: the first manifestation of ‘It’ is an African-American man – the first viewers see in this film – walking slowly and consistently towards the café in which Hugh and the as-yet-untarnished Jay are enjoying a milkshake. Yet Mitchell punctures this reading in various ways; though Jay is coded as classically innocent and virginal, it is later revealed that she lost her virginity some time ago, and does not consider sex to be a ‘big deal.’ Further, unlike AIDS, and contrary to classic contagion horrors, the film’s curse does not spread to the suburbs virally, but serially, passed from single person to person in a straight line, meaning that Jay *must* have sex – repeating what was done to her – to survive. Though, in theory, this suggests a single origin for the chain of transmission, it is one that constantly evades the characters. When Jay and her friends later return to the urban core in search of

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<sup>78</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2002), as paraphrased by Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016), p.247-8.

the source of monstrosity, their efforts are frustrated; all they learn is that they can postpone their mortality by ‘buying time’ and driving away, or by temporarily inflicting their misery upon more vulnerable others. Thus, the film becomes a moral dilemma. Is suburbanite Jay, like so many before her, willing to sacrifice the lives of others to survive?

In an excellent reading of the film, Johanna Isaacson posits that *It Follows* ‘sets up a parallel between gendered violence, in which women’s bodies comprise a kind of “sexual fix” and fiscal violence, demanding a spatial fix.’<sup>79</sup> In other words, the film’s ‘It’ not only represents a chain of sexual disease, but also embodies ‘the speculative spatial growth and capital accumulation that plunders an ever-widening terrain of life in the face of the shrinkage of resources and urban fragmentation.’ In this chain of effect, investment in property encourages price hikes, until over-investment causes the entire structure to crash, leaving surplus liquidity that must be reinvested. Yet the reprieve is only ever temporary; each time liquidity is reinvested in a new site, ‘capital devours this solid host, leaving it a bloodless husk’ and creating ever-greater socio-economic instability.<sup>80</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that the ‘It’ of the film is such a shape-shifter, often adopting the guise of ‘the people you love’ simply to hurt or confuse characters longing to invest in something meaningful and permanent.

Significant about Jay’s voyage into the city core is how starkly the scenes of post-industrial ruin contrast with the dreamlike mise-en-scene of her crumbling suburb. Whilst the latter appears as a non-specific, iconographic enclave filled with vintage cars, the former is mapped with a brutal specificity and attention to detail, revealing the city’s marginalised spaces. Yet Mitchell is at pains to suggest the continuity between the two. In a lengthy driving scene, the friends travel through increasingly dilapidated inner-ring suburbs, past shuttered factories, boarded up car-repair shops and miles of urban prairie, and finally stop in Hollywood Drive, metres from Eight Mile. From the relative comfort of their car, these heretofore sheltered teens pass so many vulnerable black pedestrians that it becomes impossible not to notice the levels

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<sup>79</sup> Johanna Isaacson, “‘It Follows’: Contemporary Horror and the Feminization of Labor,” *Blind Field Collective*, 27 October 2015 <<https://blindfieldjournal.com/2015/10/27/it-follows-contemporary-horror-and-the-feminization-of-labor/>> [Accessed 6 May 2017].

<sup>80</sup> Isaacson, web.



of stratification between the mostly white suburbs and the mostly black inner city, and thus to acknowledge urban crisis as a matter of racial inequality and racialised disenfranchisement. It is here that viewers begin to appreciate that processes of deindustrialisation and socio-economic stratification have directly contributed to bodily vulnerability.

Unlike *Don't Breathe's* Detroit, the city here is neither empty nor filled with bogey-men, but it *is* a scantily populated place in which black bodies are ghosts haunting the blurred background. Once again, sinister music and a refusal to individuate the threat evokes a ubiquitous fear, in which the post-industrial landscape itself is the monster devouring its inhabitants, leaving empty lots and spectral traces. As Lowenstein notes, as viewers scan the wide-angle frame looking for lone figures in pursuit, 'aloneness itself becomes a sign of potential monstrosity. [...] We experience perceptually as spectators what Detroit has been through economically and socially – the subtraction of human presence, the loss of community.'<sup>81</sup> In an environment in which each figure is a potential threat, connecting with fellow inhabitants becomes undesirable and potentially fatal. Charged with the responsibility of seeking out the threat in every frame, viewers have no choice but to address their own complicity in coding this precarity. Though problematic as an AIDS metaphor, the fact that the curse is sexually transmitted may at least draw attention to disparities within the healthcare system caused by uneven development, with substandard care for the disenfranchised inner-city population indirectly contributing to the spread of illness. Furthermore, where Jay and her friends can 'buy' access to mobility and, subsequently, to a longer life, the lack of public transportation for their inner-city counterparts is likely to put them face-to-face with the threat that stalks them.

It is just north of Eight Mile Road that the friends find the deteriorating house that Hugh had temporarily called home, and discover that he is not a transient or city native, but a wealthy suburbanite from the countrified Jaycee Park, who had seemingly ventured closer to the urban core to infect a more vulnerable urbanite. The fact that suburbanite Jay winds up being his chosen target is perhaps unsurprising; as

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<sup>81</sup> Lowenstein, *Annual Pittsburgh Lecture*.

an inhabitant of the inner-ring suburbs, she is deemed more disposable than he.<sup>82</sup> Though Hugh's squat is a desiccated husk of a property, it so closely resembles Jay's own foursquare house that it materialises both a vision of her future *and* a reminder of the area's middle-class past. Inside, the remnants of Hugh's presence include numerous semen-covered tissues, drawing attention to his act of passing on the curse as an encounter with the abject, an attempt to expel the vulnerability within himself to fortify the boundaries of his own body.

In chapter two, I noted that abjection is often simultaneously psychological and socially motivated. In the words of Casey Ryan Kelly, to shore up a fantasy of impermeability, we must force 'classes of disposable persons to take on the burden of precarious life. [...] The poor and people of colour bear the burden of industrial pollution and wealth inequality.'<sup>83</sup> Though initially reluctant to pass on their burden, the desperate friends are eventually driven to sacrifice others in much the same way, selecting prostitutes from amongst Detroit's industrial ruins. Interestingly, the colour white features increasingly prominently as the film goes on – first worn only by the creature, but later adopted by Jay and her friend Paul – as though mirroring the white culpability of the newly initiated adults, whose behaviour ultimately becomes as reprehensible and automatic as the creature's.

Nevertheless, try as the teens might to evade the threat and maintain the illusion of suburban stability, it is the monster itself that becomes the abject that lingers and transgresses, haunting the cursed with reminders of their own mortality. In all its guises, 'It' is associated with the unclean, alternately taking the form of the elderly, the already dead, the naked, the sexually abused and the soiled. Most are implicitly linked to poverty, homelessness and prostitution. Moreover, in the act of killing – which closely resembles sex – the monster drenches its victims with a clear fluid.<sup>84</sup> Mitchell employs the visual motif of water throughout to stress that the borders between city and suburb, land-locked inner-city and lakefront cottages, are not as solid as they may once have appeared. When the characters abandon the city a

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<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, Mitchell evokes a wealth divide between Jay and her neighbours. At one point, Greg's more affluent mother refers to Jay's family as 'a real mess.'

<sup>83</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, p.242.

<sup>84</sup> As Kelly notes, this is possibly also a direct allusion to fiscal liquidity.

second time for Greg's affluent lakefront cottage, they attempt to repeat the pattern of white flight enacted by their parents and grandparents. Yet they cannot escape, and as the creature pursues them, they must accept the falsity of the boundaries that had given meaning to their lives. In his analysis of the cinematic suburb, Timotheus Vermeulen observes that one of its defining features is the extent to which 'the suburb – that is, an incoherent collection of indistinct spaces – is, and cannot but be, structured around an indefinable yet immanent, transitory yet permanent hollow space [...] without which it would collapse, without which it would immediately disintegrate.'<sup>85</sup> In other words, what has given the cinematic suburb meaning is the presumed, though largely uninterrogated, ideological and iconographic solidity of the urban core. As soon as the relationship between city and suburb is problematised, the concept 'of the enclosed family, separated and standing against the world' begins to break down.<sup>86</sup>

It is close to the border of Eight Mile, in a ramshackle swimming pool that they used to visit when the neighbourhood seemed safer, that the friends recognise the necessity of facing the threat that their parents had resolutely ignored. As they approach, they acknowledge their spatial and racial privilege, articulating the culture of denial that has symbolically relegated vulnerability to the city-side of Eight Mile. 'When I was a little girl, my parents never let me go south of Eight Mile,' says Yara, as they pass abandoned suburban buildings. 'And I didn't even know what that meant until I got a little older, and I started realising that that's where the city started, and the suburbs ended. And I used to think about how shitty and weird that was.' It is fitting, then, that the teenagers endeavour to drown or electrocute the monster by pummelling it with the old-fashioned domestic icons – typewriters, 1950s television sets, gaudy lampshades – that once stood for a suburban lifestyle, but are now burdens that smother them. In manifesting as her dead father – a figure who attempts to drown her as she treads water – the 'It' of the final scene evokes the burden of white patriarchy that will seek to imprison her in a valueless husk of female domesticity.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Vermeulen, p.73.

<sup>86</sup> Morrison, p.190.

<sup>87</sup> One is reminded of Berlant's description of cruel optimism as an act of treading water, stuck in a brutal survival time. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.23.

Since the monster is no more than a metaphorical displacement, it cannot be destroyed. The only choice the teenagers have is to pass on the threat to the more vulnerable, or to accept its presence. Yet the ending is not entirely hopeless. Whilst their parents remain docile, indifferent and isolated, the teenagers not only ultimately refuse the stasis that has been imposed upon them and engage the pernicious elements in the world around them, but also come to recognise the importance of finding sustenance and courage in affective relationships with their peers.

Increasingly, the friends occupy states of physical and emotional closeness, sleeping, eating and travelling together to shield Jay from an 'It' that they cannot see. This is highly unusual in a slasher film, and it offers a more optimistic and fluid alternative to the domestic isolation of the patriarchal system.

However, the film's final scene is resolutely ambiguous: their gang inexplicably depleted to two, Jay and Paul walk hand-in-hand through the suburban landscape, clad fully in white, as a distant figure follows. Though they appear calm and resigned, the empty landscape seems to have already devoured their contemporaries, leaving them with no option but to reinsert themselves into patriarchal logic. At the same time, though, Mitchell finally forsakes the iconography of earlier suburban horror to depict an identifiable and locatable suburb: gone is the soft focus and nostalgic synth soundtrack, the vintage cars and the metafictional tactics. The climate is resolutely *now*. In playful ways, the film subverts tired and superficial critiques throughout, drawing attention to the instability of the fictional suburb and the sub-genre within which it operates. In doing so, it not only avoids reifying single narratives, but also 'broadens the scope of what cinematic horror means and why it matters.'<sup>88</sup>

Both *Don't Breathe* and *It Follows* confront the violent repressions underpinning certain cultural representations of Detroit, and tackle the 'complications inherent in Detroit's poverty [and] the entanglements between policy, history and race that continue to create its present.'<sup>89</sup> Yet such focus risks painting the city as little more

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<sup>88</sup> Lowenstein, *Annual Pittsburgh Lecture*.

<sup>89</sup> Millington, p.46.

than a metonym for destitution, the paradigm example of deindustrialisation's negative consequences. In the following section, I turn to a film that combines horror and humour in the service of exposing Detroit as a complex cultural construction, whilst refusing to succumb to abstracting visions that alienate or isolate those who continue to live there. Interestingly, the 'outsider' protagonists of Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive* take opposing views on Detroit's present and future. For Adam, a bohemian transient seeking temporary reprieve from the repetitious nature of his life, the decaying Detroit offers the ideal place to be alone to contemplate the wreckage of the modern world, the irrevocable decline of culture and the failure of civilisation. For Eve, his more optimistic partner, Detroit's exquisite rewilding testifies to the fundamentally *cyclical* nature of history and the promise of post-apocalyptic rebirth.

Of course, to embrace either view wholeheartedly requires a certain vagueness – which both Adam and Eve possess – as to the origins of Detroit's decline, and a sense that the city embodies the obsolescence of humanity as we know it. Named after the first humans, Jarmusch's vampire couple consider it their inalienable right to appropriate the urban frontier of ruined Detroit. To transform the city into a wilderness, however, they must semantically erase the black population living there, a process that involves taking night-time tours of 'white' Detroit and completely ignoring African-American history, whilst continuing to suck the life from its present.<sup>90</sup> Ultimately, it is their white middle-class privilege and desire for hermetic seclusion that emerges as both monstrous and unsustainable.

### **III. White Alienation and Vampirical Gentrification in Jim Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2014)**

In a 2009 article for the *New York Times*, Toby Barlow wrote of Detroit, 'In a way, a strange, new American dream can be found here, amid the crumbling, semi-majestic ruins of a half-century's industrial decline. The good news is that, almost magically, dreamers are already showing up.'<sup>91</sup> After years of decrying the decline of Detroit, journalists had begun to adopt a new slant: thanks to its cheap rent and anything-

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<sup>90</sup> Adam has literally struck up a deal with a black doctor in an inner-city hospital, who supplies him with the fresh blood of his patients.

<sup>91</sup> Toby Barlow, 'For Sale: The \$100 House,' *New York Times*, 3 July 2009  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/opinion/08barlow.html>> [Accessed 6 August 2017].

goes reputation, Motor City was blossoming as a bohemian refuge for artists and musicians seeking a place away from the supposed vulgarity and homogeneity of the mainstream. Distancing themselves from the corporate machine that was steam-rolling through parts of Midtown and Downtown and pushing up the cost of real-estate, many of these urban pioneers preached ‘gentle-fication’ and sought to connect to the ‘authentic’ Detroit. On one hand, such trends exemplified that gentrification, like suburbanisation, was not a coherent, singular concept; its processes were not necessarily driven by big business or even a personal desire for material gain. On the other, they seemed to testify to the changing face of the middle class.

It was once considered ‘anti-American to even flirt with the idea of thwarting manifest destiny, let alone embrace the notion of getting smaller,’ claims thirty-something Robert in Benjamin Markovitz’s 2015 satirical novel, *You Don’t Have to Live Like This*, observing the streams of young, educated liberals flocking to repopulate the ‘ruined’ Detroit.<sup>92</sup> Attempting to define his yen to join them, he settles on the apparent anaesthetisation of suburbia, musing that ‘there must be a better test of who [he] is than middle-class American life.’<sup>93</sup> Yet Robert is just drifting, and his professed intention to live simply disguises a more sinister imagining of himself as a white saviour, courageously civilising the ‘native’ black Detroiters by providing them with employment opportunities. For the residents themselves, who rarely use the cafes and record stores that Robert and his friends open around them, this more accurately constitutes ‘glorified servitude.’<sup>94</sup> For all his attempts to cast his desires as more modest, ‘chaste and saintly’ than those of his parents, Robert’s colonialist fantasies are strikingly familiar.<sup>95</sup>

For gentrification’s critics, this search for the authentic has less to do with assimilating into the existing culture than with seeking social distinction and the opportunity to experiment in an imagined tabula rasa. To effectively aestheticise Detroit’s almost-apocalyptic glory, these gentrifiers must ignore the fact that the city remains inhabited, and then draw rigid, exclusionary boundaries – both rhetorically

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<sup>92</sup> Benjamin Markovitz, *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), p.87.

<sup>93</sup> Markovitz, p.4.

<sup>94</sup> Markovitz, p.151.

<sup>95</sup> Markovitz, p.83.

and physically – to maintain the illusion. Whilst positioning themselves in commercial and philosophical opposition to less socially conscious forms of gentrification, their dream recalls the frontier spirit of the original colonisation of America, *and* the marketed dream that galvanised 1950s white flight. A closer look at Detroit's resurgence reveals a city only really 'bouncing back' for the predominantly white community of suburbanites and New York ex-pats moving in. For many who have never left and who have been subject to years of socio-economic neglect, such 'gentle-fication' not only has little positive effect, but also vastly inflates the property market, threatening to drive them from the now-prospering Midtown and city core. In certain cases, the city has already begun paying for residents to vacate their houses so that the land can be redeveloped. Though it would be a mistake to invoke processes of urban gentrification as unequivocally damaging to all but a white elite, the media-friendly story of Detroit's artistic fresh-start disguises the geopolitical and economic stratification habitually tied to the desire for social distinction.

It is precisely this socio-economically privileged obsession with authenticity and commercialisation that Jim Jarmusch parodies in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, figuring the alienated middle-class aesthetes that once populated the suburban literature of Cheever and DeLillo as hapless urban vampires that physically and semantically distance themselves from the mainstream whilst continuing to draw from it. When watching the film, it is easy to forget that anyone *ever* lived in Detroit. As the aptly named Adam and Eve take night-time tours of the deserted streets, coyotes cry in the darkness, ugly concrete husks teeter on the brink of collapse and traffic lights blink uselessly. A city shrouded in near-permanent shadow, it hardly resembles the land of opportunity increasingly evoked by the press. It is here that reclusive Adam – part Romantic aesthete, part 1980s Goth – holes himself up and awaits the apocalypse, passing the time composing funereal dirges and occasionally toying with the idea of hastening the end through suicide. After centuries of living, Adam has become morose, alienated from the past and filled with despair about mass-produced music and temporary fads, the ruination of great buildings and the vulgarity of commercialisation. Revealing that he no longer has the stomach for London, he appears to have selected Detroit precisely because 'no one fucking lives out here,' and he can indulge his love of vintage instruments and analogue equipment without

interruption.<sup>96</sup> He has even done his own electrical wiring, in homage to Tesla, so that he need not connect to the Detroit grid. Though his one human friend urges him to promote his music in different mediums, Adam refuses, ostensibly because making it more widely available would denigrate its value.

Such is Adam's cultural elitism and impression of the landscape as rightly his alone that he considers anyone who disturbs his solitude to be a member of the 'zombie' masses. By zombies, he means humans, who he believes have abandoned their principles and squandered their opportunities to improve the world. The zombie figure has a long history of being employed by Hollywood to evoke a vulgar, consumerist culture that mindlessly honours convenience over beauty.<sup>97</sup> As Robin Wood notes, 'the fact that they consume flesh is but a literal enactment of the notion that under Capitalism we all live off other people.'<sup>98</sup> For all Adam's self-conscious eccentricity, it is somewhat troubling that this white intellectual is presented as having centuries of knowledge whilst Detroit's ghosted, mainly black community of 'zombies' is not given space to defend itself against the allegation that it has let the city crumble. Further, the film's aesthetic tallies so frequently with Adam's own – featuring music from the 1960s and lingering lovingly on old instruments and record players – that one could reasonably conclude that Jarmusch shares Adam's sensibility that art no longer has power, and that there is nowhere to go but backwards.

Nevertheless, the character that most clearly stands for the popular culture that Adam so disdains is not one of Detroit's 'zombie' natives, who, when they appear at all, are depicted as having a clear reverence for cultural artefacts and an ability to look beyond themselves, but Ava, Eve's vampire sister, who arrives uninvited from

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<sup>96</sup> In the traditional vampire story, the narrative arc features a journey from the pre-modern country to the modern city.

<sup>97</sup> Crucially, the zombie figure is not solely an outgrowth of U.S. capitalism. As I discuss below, it is also fundamentally linked to black culture and to slavery; the figure of the zombie derives from the voodoo notion of undead spirits. This notion, which came to the U.S. from West Africa, via the Caribbean, came to be associated in black culture with slaves, figurative zombies who experience social death through their lack of control.

<sup>98</sup> Robin Wood, 'Neglected Nightmares,' *Horror Film Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 2000), p.126, as qtd. by Aviva Briefel, "'Shop Till You Drop!' Consumerism and Horror,' *Horror After 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror*, ed. by Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller (Texas: Texas University Press, 2011), pp.142-162, p.143.



‘zombie central’ (Los Angeles). A clear representative of Generation Y, despite being several hundred years old, Ava delights in the kitsch, the vulgar and the mainstream, ignores vampire etiquette, talks repeatedly about mediums such as YouTube and downloads, and gorges herself unabashedly on O-Negative Blood.

In fact, for all their efforts to distance themselves from the baseness of their appetites by drinking blood from crystal glasses, it is Adam and Eve who ‘live off’ people in both a literal and metaphorical way. Though he has forged something of a reluctant connection with a human – the earnest Ian – Adam values him mainly because he sources old guitars and acts as a middle-man who gets his music into the world. In *Beautiful, Terrible Ruins* (2015), Dora Apel distinguishes between vampires and zombies by asserting that, though both are undead, the ‘aristocratic vampire is the figure that enslaves while the zombie has come to represent the modern equivalent of the enslaved: the socially expendable labourer the migrant, the refugee, the asylum seeker, the impoverished, the unemployed, the productively “useless” – that is, the figure without autonomy who is consigned to a biopolitical existence.’<sup>99</sup>

Zombies first appeared in Haitian folklore in the early twentieth century as the ‘reanimated corpses of former slaves that were brought back from the dead to be enslaved again.’<sup>100</sup> In recent years, the zombie has enjoyed a resurgence in visual culture in response to ‘seismic economic and social transformations’ such as deindustrialisation and globalisation, which have produced ‘extremes of joblessness juxtaposed with the great prosperity of the wealthy whose wealth seems to have no obvious source’ because it is based on market speculation.<sup>101</sup> The language of vampires, meanwhile, has long been used by figures such as Karl Marx to ‘describe the bloodsucking effects of capitalism’ during industrialisation, and to allude to the affluent populations that exploit the ‘unseen labour’ of impoverished, expendable ‘zombies’ to produce their wealth.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Apel, p.143.

<sup>100</sup> Apel, p.140.

<sup>101</sup> Apel, p.140.

<sup>102</sup> According to Apel, p.143.

Though certainly not presenting Adam and Eve in such a damning light, Jarmusch implies that the affluent pair who so disdain the masses are in fact surviving off black Detroiters. Interestingly, one of only two black characters that appear in the film is Adam's doctor, who works in an inner-city hospital and supplies Adam with blood. Whilst this sapping of Detroit's lifeblood by white vampires remains mostly literal in Jarmusch's gentle parody, it holds undeniable metaphorical power as an allusion to the various processes of gentrification, mass privatisation, corporate exploitation and cultural appropriation that have transformed Detroit in recent years. More broadly speaking, it testifies to an unjust healthcare system that only provides life-saving treatment to those that can afford it: indeed, necessity drives Adam to seek a doctor, since humanity's blood is now contaminated.

Jarmusch does, however, work to illuminate the complex, racialised politics of nostalgia underpinning representations of Detroit. When Adam takes Eve on his night-time tours of Detroit, he rarely deviates from the white urban-explorer route that takes in the exquisite ruins of the Packard Plant and Michigan Theatre. Showing little or no interest in the city's human present, the couple imbues these ruins with what Mark Binelli calls a 'sacred aura,' thereby partaking in the philosophical erasure of black Detroiters in the service of evoking an idealised past and ruined present.<sup>103</sup> Though Adam does briefly allude to Detroit's black heritage, offering to show Eve the Motown Museum, he quickly discourages her with, 'it's not much to look at from the outside,' which is a clear allusion to the privileging of aesthetics over historical resonance. Instead, he takes her to Jack White's house in Detroit's affluent suburbs to show her the birthplace of a still-living 'legend' whose music is, according to some critics, synonymous with cultural appropriation.<sup>104</sup> Eve is impressed; clearly, for them, *this* is the real Detroit. Later, on a mission to experience Detroit's music scene, they go and see the aptly named *White Hills* – a band formed in 2005 in New York City. The film itself, meanwhile, contains little or no reference to Detroit's black artists or musicians, or indeed to any recent African-American music, and the many portraits of historical figures that adorn Adam's wall are white and long-dead.

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<sup>103</sup> Binelli, p.276.

<sup>104</sup> See the ambiguously titled biopic by Nick Halsted, *Jack White: How he Built an Empire from the Blues* (London: Overlook-Omnibus, 2016).

Eve, too, partakes in similarly racist processes, despite being ostensibly portrayed as the yang to Adam's yin. Almost albino in her whiteness, she forms a striking visual contrast to Adam's gothic aesthetic, and takes a correspondingly sunnier view of history. Where her partner continually laments the decline of civilisation and the neglect of art and learning, Eve has a seemingly inexhaustible capacity to recognise what continues to be worthwhile. Her view of history as cyclical – symbolised visually by her love of turning in circles and rhetorically by her refrain that 'we've been here before' – makes her capable of stomaching modern culture in a way that Adam cannot, and she is presented as being equally at home with dusty old paperbacks and iPhones. Partly, her relentless optimism and determination to survive acts as a reminder of the many wonders of the world – the white dwarfs in the sky, the plants on the earth, music, literature, dancing – and prevents Adam from succumbing to a 'self-obsession' that is 'a waste of living.' When Adam blames the 'zombies' for squandering their talents, Eve reminds him that some of the greatest scientific discoveries and works of art have been made by his human counterparts, and cautions him against cultural elitism. Most notably, when Eve joins Adam in Detroit, it is not the ruined architecture and civilisation's failed promise that captures her interest so much as the ascendant 'nature.' 'Mephitis mephitis!' she coos, as a skunk crosses her path, and later delights in remembering the Latin name of the out-of-season Fungi reclaiming Adam's back garden. Yet Eve's assurance that 'the city will rise again' because 'there's water here. When the cities in the south will burn' – a statement that seems to allude to the destructive effects of global warming – relies upon an equally troubling conceptualisation of nature as a destructive/redemptive force that will turn the hourglass over and start humanity afresh. As earlier noted, given that Detroit is 80% African American, the white Eve's binaristic conception of culture and nature, and her apparent preference for the latter, points to a desire for nature to erase African-Americans from the landscape and reclaim the city.

In *Escaping the Split-Level Trap*, Tim Foster argues that to conceive of gentrification solely in terms of alienated, white middle classes is a fallacy, which risks simply 're-

instituting clichéd ideas of suburbia in the new habitus of the inner city.’<sup>105</sup> Jarmusch is not insensitive to this fact. As Steven Shaviro rightly notes in his review of the film, *Only Lovers Left Alive* is ‘self-consciously’ about a ‘hegemonic whiteness’ that ‘is in a real sense dead; but as it is incapable of realising this, it still rolls on and oppresses everyone else.’<sup>106</sup> In very different ways, and often in different countries, both Adam and Eve perpetuate decades of racialised repression, often whilst barely conscious of their power and privilege. It is not Detroit itself that embodies hollowness, decay and false promise for its middle-class returners, but the elitist white culture that feeds off it whilst remaining fatally unable to look beyond its own limited pleasures. Instead of being all-powerful, Adam and Eve increasingly resemble deluded heroin addicts consuming a drug that is slowly killing them. Though *they* might affect themselves as whimsical Victorian opium addicts, Jarmusch’s camera-work deliberately invokes the sordidness of *Trainspotting* (1996, dir. Danny Boyle). Meanwhile, though certainly a city replete with vacant buildings, Detroit endures, accommodating a growing music scene and working-class individuals, such as Ian, who do not exhibit a desire to actively displace their peers. In broader terms, the slow, self-imposed decline of the vampire elite arguably works as a metaphor for the obsolescence of nation-states in a world that requires ‘unrestrained global circulation.’ As Apel notes, ‘as the free flow of people, capital and goods occurs, the state nonetheless tries to keep out migrants, or locks them into detention camps and centres. [...] Migrants are effectively turned into zombies by a state that has become deindustrialised and thus incarcerates potential workers seeking employment.’<sup>107</sup> On leaving Adam and Eve to their insular lives, Ava rightly labels them both ‘condescending snobs,’ and opts to return to the zombies.

Ultimately, it is Ava, having murdered Ian because he looked ‘so cute,’ who galvanises Adam and Eve’s white flight to Tangier, a city that has functioned as a refuge for disenchanted Western aesthetes since the 1950s. Eve has lived here on-and-off for some time, similarly consuming and then taking on its non-white culture as her own. Yet something has changed. Eve’s friend, playwright Christopher

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<sup>105</sup> Tim Foster, *Escaping the Split-Level Trap: Postsuburban Narratives in Recent American Fiction* (Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Nottingham, July 2012), p.247.

<sup>106</sup> Shaviro, Steven, ‘Only Lovers Left Alive,’ *The Pinocchio Theory*, 10 April 2014, web. <<http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1205>> [Accessed 28 February 2017].

<sup>107</sup> Apel, p.144.

Marlow, has died from imbibing contaminated blood, leaving the couple with no reliable source. As they wander the streets on the brink of starvation, they encounter the heavenly singing of Yasmine Hamdan, a woman whose voice combines the ancient with the modern to offer something entirely new to a pair that had feared that their lives were in decline. Ultimately, it is in looking beyond the sterility of their own, dead culture, and embracing the ongoing vibrancy of other art forms from other cultures, that gives them sustenance and restores their will to live. Of course, Jarmusch remains suitably ambivalent about the extent to which art can offer salvation and bring about positive change. Adam and Eve's new 'engagement' with life sees them abandoning their aesthete behaviour and adopting more barbaric methods of getting their fill (directly biting their victims). In a sense, too, the entire film is a tongue-in-cheek parody of a couple whose engagement with the city is *purely* aesthetic, and, thus, ignorant of Detroit's multifaceted reality. Nevertheless, the film itself embodies precisely the cross-pollination and diversity that its characters mostly lack. Working within the traditionally 'low' genre of horror and the mass-cultural medium of film, whilst simultaneously drawing upon and revising vampire film codes, Jarmusch combines a clear reverence for the past with a passion for the possibilities of the present.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have endeavoured to illuminate the ways in which recent horror films have grappled with Detroit as a lived phenomenon, rather than an alternately exoticised and vilified Other. A declining, deindustrialised, predominantly black city, surrounded by affluent, predominantly white suburbs, Detroit's geographies of race and class are by no means unique. Yet it remains the paradigmatic example of decay from which society all-too-easily turns away. It is for this reason that Jerry Herron argues that 'it's not the actual border that counts, but the way the border gets represented.'<sup>108</sup> His words testify to the importance of exchanging an aesthetic engagement for a political one that recognises Detroit as an ongoing phenomenon rather than a finished creation. They also point to the ongoing influence of visual representations in telling Detroit's story. *Don't Breathe*, *It Follows* and *Only Lovers Left Alive* begin the process of performing a 'counter-mapping against popular

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<sup>108</sup> Herron, 'Borderland/Borderama/Detroit: Part 1', web.

imaginaries,' attending to the places and people so frequently ghosted in previous visual representations of the city.<sup>109</sup> Far from restricting their focus to iconic ruins such as the Packard Plant and Michigan Theatre – sites which help to reify the utopian/dystopian binary – these films examine the human casualties of processes of deindustrialisation and white flight, thereby foregrounding Detroit's many side-lined histories. Further, they incite a dialogue between the spatial and the conceptual that is long overdue, and draw attention to the fact that Detroit's borders are socially constructed, and thus susceptible to spatial and conceptual reconfiguration.

Though, as writer Matthew Gandy notes, one must be wary of fortifying links between 'fantasies of natural reclamation and racial purity,' Detroit's unique status as something of a 'hybrid metropolis' – whose boundaries between city, suburb and country are increasingly blurred – makes it a valuable locus in which to begin to articulate new conceptual languages that are more flexible and unrestricted.<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to push aside critiques of these films as problematically colour-blind. Whilst their white characters remain the only truly individuated ones, the marginal and socio-economically Othered are reduced to something of an ever-present, homogenised 'absence' or 'lack.' Although I have argued that these films foreground perceptual problems in a significant and judicious way, a more critical analysis might posit that they render 'difference' almost-invisible so that they need not negotiate and nuance it. Worse still, they maintain a power dynamic whereby the already-marginalised are refused the opportunity to express their own repressed identities, desires and social realities.

In 2017, the release of *Get Out* (dir. Jordan Peele) – a suburban-set horror-comedy that tackles the ongoing violence of city/suburb race-relations head-on – did a great deal to move the debate beyond the premise that the politics of race must operate under a form of erasure. Starker still, is Kathryn Bigelow's *Detroit* (2017), a film whose horror is entirely grounded in real-world events: the 1967 riots that resulted in the deaths of 44 people, 33 of whom were black. Meticulously researched and shot in real time, *Detroit* stages what came to be known as The Algiers Motel Incident as a

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<sup>109</sup> Millington, p.54.

<sup>110</sup> Matthew Gandy, 'Urban Nature and the Ecological Imaginary,' *The Nature of Cities*, ed. by E. Swyngedouw, M. Kaika and N. Heynen (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 62-73, p.73.

microcosm of years of American race-hate, police brutality and sanctioned injustice, and forces viewers to bear witness. At the same time, it seeks to resolve what Amy Maria Kenyon calls a narrative crisis in the ‘very telling, description, naming, and interpretation of the deaths at the Algiers and of the riot itself.’<sup>111</sup>

In the weeks and months after the riots, conflicting views emerged from city and suburb, police and civilians, as to what happened at the Algiers, a motel located on the borderlines between East and West, white and black, middle and working class. None of the police officers involved reported their presence, and hearsay on the suburban side was that three men had been killed in sniper fire as police protected the community. The view from the predominantly black inner city told a very different story, one that was ultimately quashed by the courts, despite overwhelming evidence supporting its veracity. It is to this side of the story that *Detroit* attends, its poster boldly proclaiming, ‘It’s time you knew.’ In 1967, before the courts returned a ‘not guilty’ verdict, John Hershey had attempted his own resolution to the narrative crisis with *The Algiers Motel Incident*, a journalistic endeavour that staged interviews with individuals from both sides of the divide, and collated a mass of excerpts from court hearings with the intention of giving the reader enough information to make an informed decision. In practice, however, Hershey backgrounds himself so entirely, refusing to comment on who he feels is at fault, that, Kenyon notes, the book seems to imply that ‘the only available truth [is] that Detroit [is] full of stories. They were all about lived urban space, and they were all up for grabs.’<sup>112</sup>

Early reviews of Bigelow’s film have been mixed, with the director asked repeatedly in interviews to comment upon claims that she, as a white woman, is guilty of appropriating a black story.<sup>113</sup> Whilst such claims of cultural appropriation are not inherently invalid, they neglect the more fundamental issue that Bigelow is foregrounding a story that has been repeatedly, and erroneously, delegitimated. In fact, the film confronts the systemic processes of erasure head-on: in a particularly

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<sup>111</sup> Kenyon, p.10.

<sup>112</sup> Kenyon, p.11.

<sup>113</sup> Bigelow’s response to this query, when appearing on *Front Row*, was to quote James Baldwin – ‘Nothing can change until it’s faced’ – and to argue that it is ‘more incumbent on the white community to make changes than anyone else.’ *Front Row* on BBC Radio 4 (22 August 2017), Radio.

appalling scene, the victims of police brutality are separated and taken into a room where they must stare at the corpse of a black man and deny its very existence.

In *Acts of Literature*, Derrida argues that the most nuanced representations will allow themselves to be haunted by their own inevitable blind spots and Otherness to their author's intentions. Yet, this should not mean never seeking the resolution of a narrative crisis – however great the stakes – simply because a film or text's reception cannot be foreseen. What *Detroit* reminds us is that all cultural spaces contain other spaces and other narratives that may have been subsumed by the dominant socio-spatial order, and that there is enormous value in returning to moments of narrative crisis to illuminate different histories and different identities. Such strategies are not the antithesis of political action; they can make a difference, shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture. In her own work on the Algiers Motel Incident, Kenyon refers to a second, 'unofficial' trial: 'a counternarrative posed by a coalition of black activists and held in Detroit's Central United Church.'<sup>114</sup> Attended by the local community, press, friends and family of the victims, this 'People's Tribunal' listened to survivor testimonies, offered support and ultimately returned a guilty verdict for the perpetrators. Though the trial may not have been enshrined in law, it helped to spark a more radical cultural politics and united a marginalised community in a refusal to be silenced and erased. However much *Don't Breathe*, *It Follows* and *Only Lovers Left Alive* might engage in acts of subversion, their decision to keep questions open – and thus to *sustain* the narrative crisis – means that they do not definitively overturn the narrative of the status quo.

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<sup>114</sup> Kenyon, p.168.



## Conclusion: Jonathan Franzen and Literary Gentrification

In 'Why Bother?' (2002), Jonathan Franzen equates the apparent decline of the 'alive and multivalent' American novel with 'a once-great city that has been gutted and drained by white flight and superhighways. Ringing the depressed urban core of serious fiction are prosperous new suburbs of mass entertainments.'<sup>1</sup> A stark condemnation of artistic output in an era of geographical, socio-political and cultural 'sprawl,' his words posit contemporary literature as irrevocably commodified, glitzy and distracting, but ultimately rudderless and insubstantial. Once understood as a 'unified literary field' that boldly engaged with political, social and cultural discourses, American fiction has been subdivided into estranged, commercially exploitable demographic categories, and increasingly offers no more than a shallow reflection of the fragmented state of society as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Its readers, meanwhile, have abandoned the 'conflicts on which fiction' once 'thrived' in much the same way that they have forsaken the city core, any sense of citizenship having given way to passive consumption and a masochistic desire for social atomisation.<sup>3</sup> According to Franzen, a return to collective values and nurtured bonds between self and world is possible, but might only be facilitated through a return to realism and a rejection of non-linear storytelling or ornament for ornament's sake.<sup>4</sup>

Franzen's choice of metaphor to convey literature in need of a 'core' social function is revealing. In *Late Postmodernism: Fiction at the Millennium* (2005) Jeremy Green refers to Franzen as an 'elegist,' whose work follows Jürgen Habermas in constructing an idealised citizenship of readers.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, his invocation of a public sphere – in which 'rational discussion [might] generate ideas of an aesthetic, moral, and above all political kind' – imagines a valid counterpoint to the monism and resulting nihilism that is so brilliantly parodied in Wells Tower's 'Raw Water,' A.M.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Franzen, 'Why Bother?,' *How to be Alone* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), p.80; p.62. A revised and expanded version of an essay first published in Harper's Magazine in 1996, under the title 'Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels,' 'Why Bother?' debates the American novel's ongoing cultural impact in a technology-driven milieu.

<sup>2</sup> Franzen, p.62.

<sup>3</sup> Franzen, p.70.

<sup>4</sup> Franzen argues that readers do not find true enjoyment in 'some erotically joyous lateral slide of endless associations,' but in locating 'something coherent and deadly pertinent.' Franzen, p.74.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.7.

Homes' *Music for Torching* and Jim Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive*.<sup>6</sup> And, in some respects, his imagery is ethically sound. Throughout this thesis, I have attended to the many social, environmental and political hazards of the low-density sprawl that Franzen so vehemently derides.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, in his desire to produce a 'common language and a shared set of reference points' through his own cultural authority, Franzen not only minimises the 'violent divisions of politics and culture' already taking place in the urban core, but also risks abstracting and excluding the 'mosaic of subcultures' and minority histories – both literary and material – that may not fit his value system.<sup>8</sup> His claim that fiction has become balkanised by identity politics, to the extent that 'young writers today feel imprisoned by their ethnic or gender identities,' seems to be, at least in part, a lament about the declining popularity of the white middle-class writer and a dirge for the city's apparently diminishing legibility.<sup>9</sup> In the twenty-first century, both the novel and the city, Franzen implies, are in desperate need of coherent ground-plans.

Considering the ugly racist and classist undertones of the 're-colonisation' of Detroit, discussed in chapter four, Franzen's literary gentrification – his continuing investment in the idea of the urban core as the privileged locus of the authentic and ontologically secure, and his claim that the suburbs are irresponsible, postmodern spatialities – skirts dangerously close to reasserting the increasingly white middle-class city as the ideal, ordered domain of communal rationalism. In Detroit at least, the unified diversity that he heralds in a return to the city is something of a hollow concept. Meanwhile, at a time when many U.S. suburbs are experiencing problems ranging from property foreclosures to increased crime, as well as significant demographic shifts, wishing for their demise threatens to reinstate the hegemonic, binaristic narratives that this thesis has sought to undermine.<sup>10</sup> Put simply, Franzen's

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<sup>6</sup> Green, p.8.

<sup>7</sup> Sprawl is irrefutably worse for the environment than inner-city densification projects. It consumes the greatest number of resources and increases pollution through greater car use.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (London: Picador, 2008), p.132; Green, p.7.

<sup>9</sup> Franzen, p.80.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Tongson cites *Time Magazine*'s 2009 claim that 'the American suburb as we know it is dying [...] Thanks to changing demographics, including a steady decline in the percentage of households with kids and a growing preference for urban amenities among Americans young and old, the suburban dream of the big house with the big lawn is vanishing.' Although, as Tongson notes, this could be viewed in a positive light as 'the architectures of normativity coming to ruin,' the

aesthetic and theoretical search for an alternative to postmodern deconstruction and irony is a culturally conservative, and even elitist, refutation of mass culture.<sup>11</sup>

In the introduction to this thesis, I asked whether it might be possible to trace certain affinities between postmodern or experimental literary writing and suburban sprawl and wondered how useful positing such correspondences could be. For Franzen, the links are transparent, and his antagonism implies that both threaten his very sense of what it means to be American, even as they encapsulate it so clearly. Throughout this project, I have stressed that not all fictions and films that adopt metafictional and non-linear approaches are concerned with nothing more than formally deconstructing the status quo, just as not all realist fictions that are interested in social experience seek the retrenchment of established interests. In fact, I began this project by positing that the quintessential realist fictions of Yates, Updike and Cheever – so often assigned to restrictive categories by literary critics – are all fundamentally engaged with the possibilities of creating new languages of personal and place identity in a complex, shifting suburban spatiality. In chapter four, meanwhile, I demonstrated that the mass cultural medium of cinematic horror has the potential – not always fully realised – to confront structural inequalities and challenge accepted ways of seeing.<sup>12</sup> It is my contention that all the works discussed in this project – irrespective of designated genre – use sprawl's many contradictions to seek out a localised postmodernity that is neither restrictive nor completely free-floating. Fundamental to the texts discussed in chapters two and three is an understanding that critical responses to sprawl risk being incorporated into its reproduction, and several of the

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simultaneous decline of suburban service economies threatens the 'primary source of income for [...] immigrants, migrants, and working-class communities.' Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), p.13.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth stressing that Franzen's own fiction is more equivocal than his literary critical directives would seem to suggest. In *Freedom*, Walter Bergman – an earnest, politically conscious environmentalist – arguably embodies the various tensions between civic duty and social engineering. That Walter's fate is to end up frustrated and alone in the wilderness, like a sad parody of a Thoreauvian hero, arguably reflects something of a self-conscious failure to realise his vision of changing a culture, or of finding personal satisfaction by 'jettisoning [his] perceived obligation to the chimerical mainstream.' Franzen, p.95. In *The Twenty-Seventh City*, meanwhile, Franzen invokes the institutionalisation of anti-urbanism and the criminalisation of the poor, portraying white gentrification as partly responsible for the dispossession of diverse communities of colour. At the level of form, his novels frequently display unresolved tensions between postmodern formalism and realism. Nevertheless, I would argue that Franzen's critical directives might be evaluated on their own terms, without seeking evidence or justification in his fiction.

<sup>12</sup> I conclude chapter four by positing that, whilst they are undeniably subversive, *Don't Breathe*, *It Follows* and *Only Lovers Left Alive* do not fully overturn the status quo because they do not confront its problems head-on.

authors analysed express a certain frustration at what they perceive to be their own political impotence in the face of a change that they cannot control or even accurately represent.<sup>13</sup>

However, none simply embrace radical instability for its own sake, and all go some way towards foregrounding systemic injustices and material struggles, irrespective of the fact that – as fictions – they are not duty-bound to map out plans for social transformation. I have argued that the authors’ use of irony and parody is not demonstrative of a burgeoning a-politicism, but is instead employed as a means of negotiating suburbia’s complex socio-cultural and literary inheritance. I have suggested, moreover, that all of the works discussed deliberately stage oscillations between the polarities associated with suburban development – homogenisation and diversification, growth and implosion, nostalgia and cynicism, rupture and continuity – in search of a rhetoric that is neither dominated by a single narrative nor devoid of hope for political change. I have sketched sprawl as a space that is extraordinarily resistant to encapsulation – a locus of environmental and socio-economic precarity, home to extremes of poverty and wealth, transnational alliances and racial antagonisms. It is this that makes it such a fascinating space in which to wrestle with and renegotiate opposing views of history.

This poetics encompasses works of art that adopt metafictional approaches to disrupt conventional modes of reading sprawl and make sense of a changing American landscape. In chapter one, I positioned sprawl as a mixture of forces tending towards centralisation and dispersal and claimed that, since the early 1990s, suburban fiction has been marked by an increasingly prominent, deliberately foregrounded tension between humanist and poststructuralist perspectives as it strives to avoid substituting rigid master narratives for aesthetic incoherence. In chapter two, I defended two fictions against claims that they embrace a stagnant view of the suburbs and embody a conservative return to realism. Attending to the deconstructive possibilities of language whilst refusing to close the gap between sign and signifier, these texts destabilise the total logic of the suburban landscape and encourage political critique by demonstrating how master narratives have produced material effects. In the two

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<sup>13</sup> Most notably, Danielle Dutton in *SPRAWL* (Los Angeles: Siglio Press, 2010).

texts addressed in chapter three, metafiction emerges as a suturing force that connects local actions to broader histories. As Martin Dines argues of John Barth's *The Development* (2008), Danielle Dutton's writer-narrator 'grapple[s] with the problem of producing what [she] consider[s] to be [an] appropriate narrator to account for the exigencies of the environment' her character inhabits.<sup>14</sup> In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita uses metafiction to explore the ways in which individuals might unite in an effort to shift the relations of power, both artistically and in practice. Finally, in chapter four, I argued that recent horror cinema foregrounds and subverts tired critiques, drawing attention to the instability of the urban/suburban binary and confronting spectators with their role in the process of racializing poverty.

There is a certain tension in this thesis that I wish to conclude by acknowledging; namely, it oscillates between an implicit desire to move beyond discussions of class and economics, and an understanding that suburbia has always been – and continues to be – constructed in the nexus of gender, race and class. As the project has evolved, issues of race, sexuality and gender have never been far from my mind, but this PhD has largely reflected upon constructions of white middle-class perspectives and has dedicated itself to a dissection of the more iconic visions of the suburbs. Partly, I have gravitated towards these representations because the dominant strand of literary criticism has so clearly misunderstood them, choosing instead to portray the suburban novel as being as insular and exclusionary as the material spaces that it is often attempting to critically evaluate. Inevitably, critiquing the critique risks exposing this project to accusations of conservatism. I hope, however, that I have demonstrated that all the texts and films under discussion attend, to a greater or lesser degree, to the violence at the heart of suburban development, and must therefore not be lumped together with the rigid discourses that they seek to refuse. At the same time, I concur with Robert O. Self that one must be 'wary of reducing African American history to a foil, and black self-activity to episodic explosions of violent rebellion.' Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* is not the only contemporary novel that offers an invaluable account of 'black politics and community-building, not solely silent victimisation, exclusion and containment,' whilst also staging

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Dines, 'Metaburbia: The Evolving Suburb in Contemporary Fiction,' *Making Suburbia: New Histories of Everyday America*, p.85.

oscillations between the various binaries and myths associated with the suburban imaginary.<sup>15</sup> Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) and Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) are further examples of works that could be included in a more comprehensive poetics of sprawl.<sup>16</sup> The texts I have selected for discussion represent only a small number of recent novels and films that combine realist and highly experimental elements in their search for new spatial imaginaries. I would justify their inclusion by arguing that the fictions engaged in chapters one and two have been either actively misread or pigeonholed as derivative, whilst the novels and films addressed in chapters three and four have so far received scant critical analysis.

Ultimately, in circling back to discussions of economics and class as vital determining factors in the ongoing socio-political, geographical and cultural construction of suburbia, this project has pitted itself against purely poststructuralist accounts that neglect materialist analyses in their race to champion more fluid conceptualisations of space and identity. Individuals are affected by the social and economic currents that flow through suburban spaces in myriad different ways – variously determining and being determined by them – and it is vital to be specific.

It has been my contention that the fictions of sprawl discussed in this project do not merely challenge the coherence of a national imaginary, attending to the political, social and environmental hazards of pursuing progressively privatised narratives of progress, development and modernisation without attention to historical precedent, but draw attention to the shifting, polymorphous and unequal interdependencies and affects that exist between people and places. More importantly, they gesture towards more diverse narrative strategies in their attempts to 'reframe the life of the individual within a series of larger systems' without succumbing to new totalities.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Robert O. Self, 'California and the New Suburban History,' *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2003), pp.127-134, p.129.

<sup>16</sup> Although *Paradise* traces the migrations of a community of African Americans over the course of a century, the novel's account of a centrally-planned community comprised of grid-like, pedestrian-unfriendly streets arguably signals its direct engagement with contemporary manifestations of sprawl.

<sup>17</sup> Green, p.189.

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